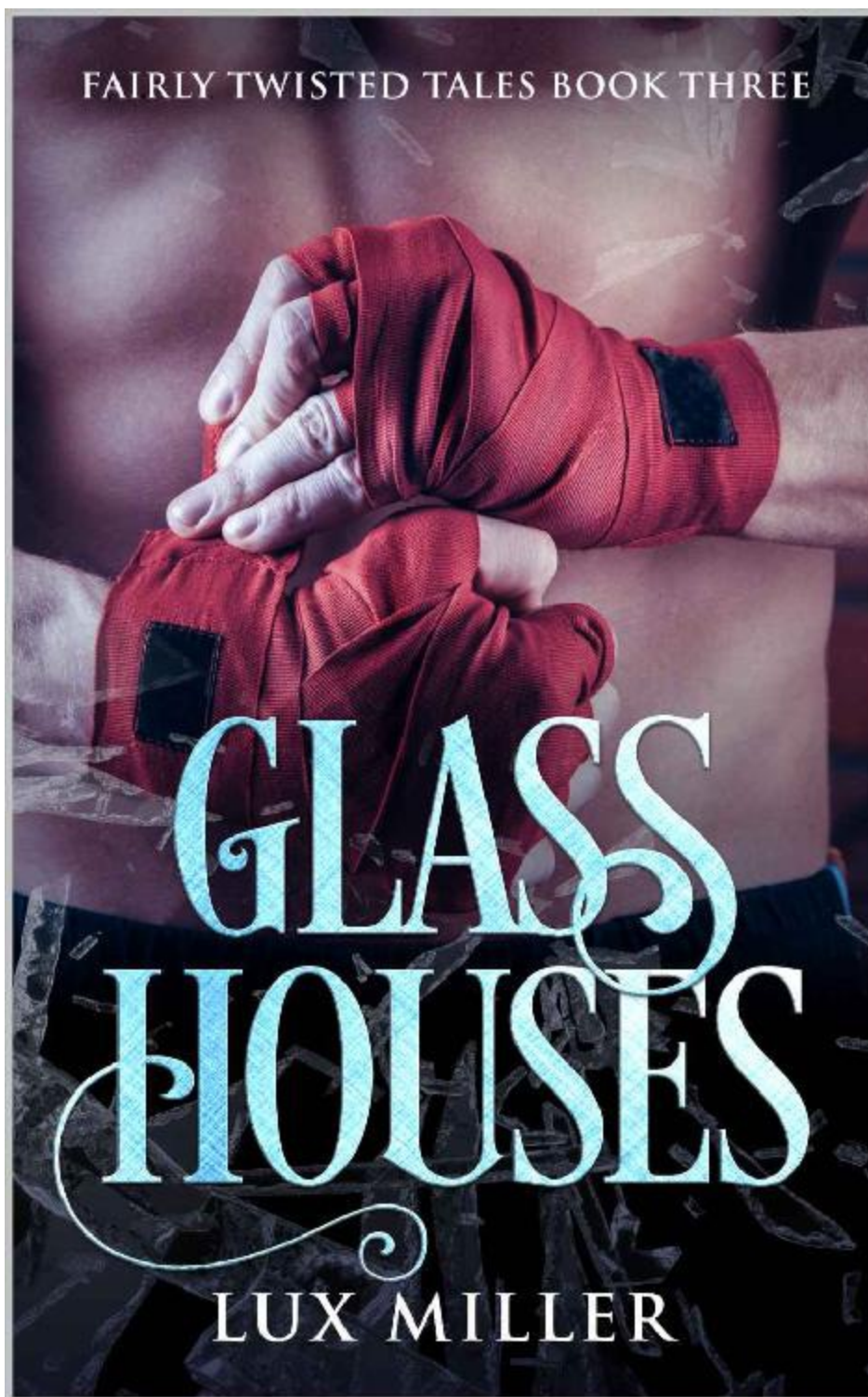




Glass Apples by Lux Miller

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination

or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living

or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Trigger warning: Please

note that there is a scene which may make survivors of sexual assault uncomfortable. Proceed with caution or skip the first chapter.

Everything between the main character and the heroine is fully consensual and there is a guaranteed HEA.



ONE

Poppy

“Hunter, I *know* it’s a bad idea, but since when did I ever have good judgement? I need a job,
and the bones are healed enough for me to be up and about. I can’t just sit around the house all day
and mope. Besides, there are far worse things I could do than becoming a cocktail waitress.”

My brother sighs heavily over the phone. “Poppy, you’re as stubborn as Liberty. You’re gonna
do whatever the hell you want, and we both know it, but let me go on record saying I didn’t tell you it
was a *bad* idea. It’s an absolutely terrible one. You know how Brad gets...”

My siblings will tell you that I don’t ever learn a lesson the first time. I have to make the same
mistakes over and over before life finally steps up and slaps me in the face with what I should’ve
already learned. Like that damn horse at the ranch. I’ve spent over a year there helping Ms. Bianchi
out. It was never my dream job, but it got me closer to getting into vet tech school. Having a
recommendation letter from a community staple like Ms. Bianchi would be the cherry on top of my
already-impressive resume.

And then Liberty happened. The unbreakable mare that refused to be ridden. But I refused to
accept the facts staring me straight in the face and made it my mission to break her. To ride her and
prove to the world that I can work with *any* animal. And she threw me off so hard, I broke my
collarbone in three places. That was the end of my ranch career. It wasn’t that Ms. Bianchi fired me -
my husband refused to let me return. My younger brother, Hunter, still works for her with his new

girlfriend, Raven. Who somehow broke the damn horse, *without* getting tossed to the ground like a drunk man's dinner.

I shudder when Hunter mentions my husband's name. "Ugh, did you *have* to bring Brad into this?"

Hunter's response is swift as he reminds me, "Well, he kinda works at the casino where you're talking about becoming a cocktail waitress. I don't know him as well as I should, but that's probably a good thing considering I already want to punch his lights out half the time. But he's not going to appreciate you walking around, serving drinks to strange men."

I roll my eyes, even though Hunter can't see me over the phone. "Relax Hunter. Brad's an okay guy. He's just a lousy husband."

My brother's voice is impatient as he responds, "So leave him, Pop. We'll figure out your medical bills, and we can figure something out for vet tech school. Please don't stay with him for his money. Six years is enough time for you to learn that he's never going to change."

I sigh as I hear the front door close. "Speaking of him, he's home. I have to go."

Hunter sounds alarmed as he spits out, "Please don't tell him while you're alone, Poppy. Please, if you're hell bent on doing this, let me be there when you do. Or call Jasp. I know he'd fly in from Cali to be there when you tell him. There's something about Brad I don't trust. I can't put my finger on it, but something about him rubs me the wrong way."

Rolling my eyes, I exhale heavily. “Hunter, y’all can’t protect me forever. You couldn’t save me
from Liberty, and you can’t save me from this. I love you, but I have to figure this out without you.
Please, butt out.”

Hunter starts to reply, but I don’t hear what he has to say. I click the end button on my phone and
toss it onto the bed as my husband walks into the bedroom. His demeanor is calm, but I can tell
already that he’s furious about something. I take a deep breath and look up at him, plastering a fake
smile on my face. “Hey honey, you’re home early.”

Brad narrows his eyes at me as he takes off the sport coat embroidered with the casino logo and
hangs it on the hook on the back of the door to our bedroom. He doesn’t return my smile. Yeah, he’s
mad about something. Brad stomps across the room and leans down over me, his face thunderous as
he growls, “I have to go back. Some big fight tonight and the gambling addicts are jumping at the bit
to place their bets. I just came home to enjoy my beautiful wife and make sure she doesn’t do
anything... *stupid*... while I’m out tonight.”

I flinch as his hot breath invades my nostrils. Beer. Ugh, he’s been drinking again. It’s not even
quite dinnertime, which means he was either at a business meeting knocking back cranberry shandies,
or he’s been day-drinking at the local watering hole where he picks up his whores. Either way, this
isn’t going to be pleasant. At least if there’s a fight, he’ll be too busy to be on the casino floor tonight to make my life hell there too.

He sighs as he leans over me further, pushing me back on the bed so that I have to hold myself up
with my hands behind me. He nudges his nose up along my cheekbone and he sniffs me. “Mmm, you
smell good, but there’s no dinner on the table. Ever since you got back from that blasted ranch, you’ve
been pathetic in your wifely duties. No dinner, no fancy cigars... I break my back to provide all of
this for you, and you run off to New York like an ungrateful bitch. Do you *know* what I went through while you were gone?”

He huffs as he looms over me, “Then you go and get yourself hurt and unable to take care of me.

Just about the only thing you’re still good for is laying on your back. It’s probably the only thing you ever *were* good at. Always got your nose in a book or your head in the clouds. So, since lying on your back is apparently all you’ve got to offer me today, let’s have it.”

I wince as he pushes me down onto my back, my arm collapsing out from under me as his weight
stifles me. His hands are already fumbling with the buttons on my blouse. I was hoping he’d have
gotten a piece of ass while he was out on his fancy lunch, but obviously not. Apparently, he decided
to be the loyal husband and come home to his wife. Lucky me, because this isn’t going to be enjoyable
for either of us. But neither of us will complain - him because he’s not all that picky where he sticks
his dick these days, if he was ever was... and me, because I know better. He’s taught me that much.

Brad grunts as he pushes my shirt open, his hands immediately cupping my breasts through my
bra. Despite his rough touch, my body reacts to him in a way I wish I could stop. I don’t want to
make this man feel good, and I certainly don’t want anything he does to me to be pleasurable. It just

makes it harder to reconcile my feeling of hatred towards the man I once loved.

He smirks as my nipples harden through the lace of my bra and yanks down the cups to expose me to him. He assaults my breasts, squeezing one ruthlessly in his hand while he sucks the nipple of the other between his lips, biting down on the tender flesh enough to make it sting. He slides the other hand down my body and hikes my skirt up to my hips, grasping my panties and pushing them to the side. He grins like a Chesire cat from his latch on my nipple, swirling his tongue around it. When my body shudders with arousal, he shoves two fingers inside of me.

It hurts as he pushes them to the third knuckle, but I don't dare whimper or make him think that I don't want this. He hasn't been violent since I came back from the ranch, but I don't want to give him a reason to be, either. It's been a while since he's smacked me, but I'm not itching to feel the back of his hand across my face. I'm sure he'll still bite me in places nobody else will ever see, but at least those can be covered up with clothing. A black eye is kinda hard to explain, especially when your new profession relies on looking pretty for tips.

I close my eyes as he pumps his fingers inside of me. It might feel good if he took some care with my body, but this isn't about my pleasure - it's about his. He wants it as fast as he can get it, and he doesn't care what it takes to get it. If he really wanted me to enjoy this, he'd take his time and gently ply my body to make it ready for him. He'd pay attention to the sensitive parts of my body that can make me purr.

But we both know he doesn't have time for all that nonsense. Giving me an orgasm or even

making this feel less like a duty and more like something I want to do,
would take precious time away
from his own. I cringe as his mouth and hand leave my chest and close
my eyes. He kisses and licks
down my body until he settles his upper body between my legs. He
flicks his tongue across my slit
and I squirm slightly. He skates his tongue over my clit and for the first
time in ages, a jolt of desire sizzles low in my belly, but it doesn't last.

As soon as the stifled moan tumbles from my lips, he snarls and spits. I
cringe as I feel the
artificial wetness between my legs. Before he sits up, he turns his face
to the side and bites down on
the tender flesh of my inner thigh. I yelp as he does, but don't dare pull
away as he replaces his hand
against my pussy, roughly shoving his fingers inside me again. Two
more times he follows the cycle...
spit, bite, shove. I fight back tears as the man I once loved prepares my
body to accept him. Instead
of sweet nothings, all I can hear is him unzipping his pants.

He yanks his hands away from me and for a brief moment, I'm able to
catch my breath without
feeling violated, despite lying half-naked on our marital bed. Not that
it's a sacred space. I know for
a fact he's been with other women in it. He doesn't know I know, and I
don't say anything, but I've
found the underwear that isn't mine. It isn't worth the fight to bring it
up to him, though. That's how I push him to the point of hitting me - I
question him.

My body involuntarily tenses as Brad climbs on the bed over me. He
grips my thighs in his
hands and pushes them apart, using his thumb to hold my panties to
the side. He settles himself
between my legs, and my stomach churns as I feel his dick pressing
against my entrance. Keeping my

eyes closed, I start to silently recite the mantra that has gotten me through sex with Brad dozens of times, “How long is forever? Sometimes just one second.” I repeat that over and over as Brad plunges himself inside of my small frame. He sets a brutal rhythm, and I bite down on my bottom lip to keep myself from crying out.

It’s not that Brad is exceptionally blessed in the penis department. His dick is nothing special, but he wields it like a weapon and stabs it inside of me with no regard for how it feels for me. Because he doesn’t care. He only cares how it feels for him. That’s something I learned early on in our marriage, after the vows were said of course. He wasn’t that way until after we were married. Before I said ‘I do,’ he was caring and loving and sex with him was an incredible bonding experience. But from the night of our honeymoon to this moment right now as he thrusts his way to orgasm, I don’t think he’s once cared if it felt good for me.

All Brad cares about is getting off. And getting me pregnant, but that’s never going to happen. I’ve made sure of it. He wants an heir, and I’d rather die than bring a child of his into this cruel world. He never uses a condom, and he refuses to in fact. So while he may get his rocks off inside me, he won’t be planting any seeds. As soon as he leaves, I’ll take a shower to scour out all of the seminal fluid that I can.

Then I’ll use a high-quality spermicide to hopefully take care of any errant swimmers that may still be giving it a go. If that fails, the depo shot I take every three months behind his back should

keep my insides inhospitable to his demon spawn. Not that Brad knows about any of that. He'd be

furious to know that I'm purposefully sabotaging his efforts to impregnate me.

He grunts as he stills inside of me. Bile bubbles up in my throat at the thought that right now, he's

ejaculating inside of me. He doesn't say so, but that's the only reason he'd have stopped his

relentless jackhammering into my body. He screws his face up into an ugly expression when he

comes, but I'm not opening my eyes to see if he's showing any emotion. After several minutes, his

weight leaves me as he pulls out. I can hear him rustling around in the dresser. Instead of starting a

fight, which is truthfully what I want to do, I just lay there as silent tears stream down my cheeks.

He's undoubtedly changing clothes for his swing shift at the casino. It's a job he's worked since

he was 21. He's now almost 31, and he hasn't shown any signs of switching careers. It's what he did

when we first got together, so it's just a normal part of life for me. He works by day as a blackjack

dealer and by night as a bookie in the casino's cage, taking bets on half a dozen events a night.

Sometimes, like tonight's fight, it's live events happening at the casino, but he takes the bets on all

types of races, fights, and matches across the globe. And he gets a large cut of the losses once the

casino takes theirs. It may only be a couple hundred dollars on most events, but some rake in

thousands. He's brought home five figures in salary some weeks. It's made him independently wealthy

with how often he works the cage.

After several minutes of relative silence, I open my eyes and glance around the room. It appears

that he's gone, so I reach my hand between my legs, lightly slipping a finger along my slit. I shudder

when I feel the wetness there. He definitely came inside me, and it's dribbling out of me slowly.

Though my panties have caught most of the seepage, some of it is still creating a wet spot on the

mattress under me. Sighing, I climb off the bed and strip off the clothes I'd planned to wear to my

first night on the job at the casino. Well, first night back I should say.

My entire body tenses as the front door slams. He's gone. A reprieve for now, at least. This time,

all he wanted was sex. He used to want to cuddle afterwards and pretend that we were the happy,

little couple engaging in pillow talk. Now, it just makes me want to gag. Sometimes, he still asks me

to dress up and accompany him on dates to exotic restaurants and trendy bars. It's all for show, though

and it's painfully obvious to anyone who knows us that any love that was once the foundation for this

marriage has crumbled. If only those closest to me knew that the marriage and my will to fight are in

the same boat, sailing out to sea.

I'm no longer Brad's adored wife and chosen one. He's no longer the suave, debonair blackjack

dealer who stole my heart while I served drinks to the Atlantic City sinners. There was passion there

once. We were red-hot lovers from the time I was eighteen until I decided to branch out and do

something for myself. That's when the flames fizzled. We've been together for six years and married

for four... and while I was never happily married, I've been miserable for three agonizing years.

Except for the time I spent in upstate New York working alongside my brother. That time was the

highlight of my young adult life. It was a freedom I'd never experienced and one I hated to give up.

Working on the Bianchi ranch was an amazing opportunity, but being thrown from Liberty opened

my eyes that I've been taking too many chances lately. So, I came crawling back home to a cheating

husband who probably doesn't care if I'm here or not. As long as I'm not garnering attention from

another man, I could be beaten and broken in an alley and Brad wouldn't care.

Though we have a prenuptial agreement and I'm entitled to half of everything Brad owns in the

event of a divorce, I barely have two nickels to rub together. That's literally the only thing keeping me married to the asshole.

There's no way I could ever afford one of the high-price attorneys Brad will surely hire. And

he'd bury me in court. He's made sure I know that, too. He hasn't said as much, but I think he intends

to trap me in this loveless marriage by impregnating me and forcing me to stay with my child. He's

already made it very clear that he'll never allow me to have custody of any child of his. Which is

exactly why I'm going to such lengths to keep him from getting his wish.

I shower quickly, trying to clean away the grimy feeling that clings to me after Brad has his way

with me. It doesn't do anything to make me feel human again, but at least I look presentable.

I finger-comb the wild waves of my dirty blonde hair and pin half of it up, then put on a clean

outfit and say a silent prayer that this won't be the biggest mistake of my life. Brad never specifically forbade me from working, and I'm counting on that leniency to save up enough money to run. If I can't divorce him, I'll at least leave him.

He's probably going to lose his shit when he sees that I've taken up my old job again. I don't

doubt that it's going to burn his biscuits to see his trophy in the skimpy outfits he helped design

several years ago. He made them disgustingly short so he could get his hands up the waitress' skirts

easier. I know for a fact that he's slept with half of them. But honestly, they can have him. I'd be all-too-thrilled if he stopped demanding it from me. I may be his wife, but I have no desire in being his

lover any longer. There's no love to be had there, anyway. And soon enough, if I play my cards right,

I may finally be able to crawl my way out of this rabbit hole and run for my life.



TWO

Storm

I tug my hood down over my face as I sink down further into the worn upholstery of the chair I've

dragged over to a quiet, shadowed corner of the casino. The place is abuzz with revelers who are

taking on the odds of a win. Some are here with a carefree attitude, throwing money at the one-armed

bandits like they're just here for the thrills. Others are seated at the various card games, sweating

bullets as they watch with bated breath to see if the card that turns will win them the pot, or sink their ship. Still more are buzzing around the cage where the bookie is taking bets on events, including mine

tonight. It's always the same in these casinos. Half-hope and half-desperation. It's a scent one could

bottle and sell for millions, but to me, it just reeks.

I'd normally have nothing to do with a place like this, but my chosen profession limits my

opportunities to make bank. Even more so lately since I've earned a reputation of being difficult to

work with. Which I'm not. I just have morals, and I refuse to fight a man half my size just to

artificially inflate the odds, especially since they'd want me to *lose* on purpose. I'd be a sure-win in that kind of fight and I'm not here to throw matches. Yeah, I lose sometimes, but not to an opponent

who's half my weight. That's not luck... it's just blatant fuckery, and the spectators would smell the

rat a million miles away. Throwing a match like that would be career-suicide.

Now, because I had no interest in their dog and pony show in Las Vegas, I'm stuck in a match

against an opponent that nobody cares about in a small casino in Atlantic City. Sure, it ain't some

dumpy hole-in-the-wall place. The hotel room's fine and the dinner buffet's pretty nice, but Atlantic

City in general is like Las Vegas's annoying little sister. Trying to reach the impossibly high bar the

older sibling sets, but always falling just a tad bit short. It's a B on a project you know was worth an

A, but being thankful you got the project at all. Atlantic City may not pay the big bucks like Las

Vegas, but it pays. Six-figures is nothing to shake a stick at, and an empty bank account accepts any and all checks without question.

Just because I've agreed to the six-week residency here in order to participate in the

Welterweight mixed martial arts tournament doesn't mean I'm particularly thrilled about it. But work

is work and I'm not getting any younger. I've still got at least ten years in the ring before I age out, but fighters over thirty have a hard time getting matches, especially when they're ugly motherfuckers like

me. Once your nose gets broken three times, there's no salvaging a nice profile. It's always gonna be

crooked. My two front teeth are fake, and I think my bottom lip almost always stays busted.

Aside from my perma-injuries that remind me every time I look in the mirror that I'm a fighter,

I'm not a bad looking dude, but women tend to shy away from men who make a living fighting. But

it's what comes natural to me. I've been fighting my way through life since I was seventeen-years-old.

At least I make money doing what I'd be doing anyway.

Tonight's fight is no different from any other. I'm squaring off against a guy I've fought numerous

times in the past. I know what his offensive moves are going to be already, so if I can keep my head

about me and pay attention to his defense, it should be a fairly easy knock-out. That's one thing I have on my competitors. While they've mostly fallen into a predictable pattern of moves, I have a lengthy

list of sparring moves I can pull out in the middle of the match. They might be borderline dirty, but I

haven't been disqualified yet. And until I get DQ'd, I'm gonna keep relying on the moves that have put

me at the top of my game.

I checked with the cage this morning. I'm the odds-on favorite, but they keep changing the exact

numbers. So, I bet on my opponent for shits and giggles. If I win the match, I get a winning bonus...

and if I lose, well, that means I win my bet at four to one odds, so that one thousand dollar wager I

dropped, becomes four thousand dollars. Sure, it's probably not the most ethical thing in the world,

but I fight for a living. The etiquette police gave up on me a long time ago, anyway. Besides, it's not

like I put the money down myself. I'm not stupid enough to go against MMA rules and bet on myself to

lose. I have guys that do that for me. Either way, though, I'll walk out of this fight tonight richer.

I hold my hand up to wave down the cocktail waitress that's weaving in and out of the annoyingly

chirping slot machines. I get why people play them. They take no skill whatsoever. Even the table

games are more than half pure, dumb luck, but there's a way to play the system on those too. So many

people got good at gaming the house, that they've hired plain-clothes security. They may be rent-a-

cops, but they won't hesitate to throw people out on their asses. The pretty, young girl walks over to

me and offers me a small smile. It's fake as hell, but I can't say I blame her. She's probably been hit

on by half the drunken idiots here, and that's a shame. No woman should have to deal with that kind

of bullshit just to pay the bills.

She taps her foot impatiently as she waits for me to order, and I chuckle at her flippant attitude.

She's wearing a layer of makeup that's caked on thick enough to make the ugliest broad look

presentable. I'm no makeup expert, but even I can see that this girl doesn't need it. It's probably just a part of the uniform, which is hardly what I'd call a dress. It's a wardrobe malfunction waiting to

happen, but it keeps the pervy older guys happy to watch the girls prance around in skirts short enough

to make the old biddies at church blush. It's like a dinner-show that serves nothing but upskirt views

and liquor. Just what the doctor ordered.

I nod and settle back into my chair, keeping my hood pulled around my face. "Club soda,

please... and I'll give you fifty bucks if you can bring me some crushed ice with it."

She frowns and shakes her head. "The drinks are free here, sir... compliments of the

establishment's owner. Besides, why would you pay for ice? I'll bring you some without charge. I'm

not allowed to take any money from guests."

I nod again and reach into my pocket, pulling out three twenties. "In that case, consider it your

tip. The ice is totally optional, but it would be a nice touch if you could track some down."

She stares at the bills, and I lean forward, closing her hand around them. "I know the owner of

this place wouldn't dare force an employee to decline a tip." She stands frozen for a moment, her

small hand enclosed in mine. Finally, she jerks her hand back, folding the bills and stuffing them

down into the apron tied around her waist. It's a shame that the skirt of her dress barely shows

underneath the bottom of the apron, but I can't say that I mind the view of her long, lean legs. She

clears her throat, which pulls my eyes back up to her face and the myriad of colors swimming around

in her eyes. It's hard to pinpoint exactly what color they are, but whatever Crayola may call it, it's captivating.

She tilts her head to the side. "No alcohol? It's as free as the sodas."

I shake my head and let my lips crack into a small smile. "No, thanks. I have to work tonight and alcohol is not my friend when I have to work. Hell, it's not even my friend on my off days. I doubt that shit is very friendly to anyone and it turns otherwise acceptable gentlemen into grabby fools who do stupid things and stick things in places they shouldn't. Just the club soda please... and the crushed ice if you're so inclined. The tip is yours to keep regardless."

She blinks at me in surprise, one hand brushing across her cheek as a flicker of something flashes across her face. I can't quite pin down the emotion before she shakes it off and drags her hand over her ear, tucking a stray piece of wavy, dirty blonde hair behind her ear. She nods her head and turns, scurrying away before I can say anything else.

"And another one bites the dust," I muse to nobody as I pity myself over my complete lack of luck with women. I'm a bruised, and after tonight, bloodied fighter. A woman like that would never find solace in the arms of a brute like me. I shake my head to clear away the thoughts as she returns, a look of concern on her face. I feel the slight weight of the hood slip off my head, but I don't make an effort to yank it back up just yet. Maybe I should have. Her expression sets me on edge as she hands me the fizzing glass of club soda with crushed ice, as requested.

She wasn't overly friendly to begin with, but something is absolutely frigid about her demeanor

now, and it has nothing to do with the freezing cup of soda in my hand. She wasn't gone that long.

What or who could possibly have gotten to her that fast and set her on a razor's edge?

Her voice is soft and reserved, all hints of irritation gone, as she murmurs, "Good luck tonight on your fight, Storm."

Ah, so she *does* recognize me. Looks like my reputation precedes me. It's going to be a long six weeks if all of the employees are going to be on edge every time I walk into a room. I knew I should

have kept the hood pulled up tighter, but the security was starting to get antsy, anyway. They don't like it when people try to hide themselves, but truth be told, this casino is loaded with bullshitters who're

in hiding. I give her a curt nod of my head and hold up the glass, "Cheers...?"

She squirms slightly under my gaze and sighs, relenting with a soft murmur, "Poppy. My name is

Poppy, but I can't stay here and keep up this conversation, even if you *are* rather charming. I meant it about your fight tonight. I hope you win."

She turns and scurries away before I can get over the shock of this encounter. People don't

usually root for me to win. They usually want me to lose, because they usually bet against me. Hell,

even *I* bet against me because the payout on a loss is four times the bet. My reputation takes a nasty hit every time I lose, and my manager gets his panties in a twist when he has to explain to my

investors why I lost, but it pads my pocket for a while, and it's way easier to lose than it is to win.

I sip the club soda and people-watch, relaxing as best I can before the fight tonight. I have two

hours before I square off against my opponent, and my mind is scattered all over the place. It'd be easy to throw the match, but my manager will likely lay an egg if I throw another match. But I'm getting old. Most fighters my age are looking at retirement and settling down with a woman. I'm not anywhere near close to either goal, so my reputation is really all I have.

As I finish off the drink, I catch the cocktail waitress' attention. She nods at me and finishes her conversation, then walks over to me. "Is there anything else I can get for you, Storm?"

I know I'm a bit rusty on the charm, but I go for it anyway. The one benefit of having dental implants is that I know they're straight, and that my smile gives me a boyish allure that most women find irresistible. And hey, irresistible is good enough for one night to work out the kinks in my back and in my personality. This one's pretty, so I lay it on thick. "I wouldn't mind your number. It's not everyday that a man finds himself in the company of a goddess, even if you're trying to hide it under a layer of makeup so thick, it's enough to make *me* look pretty."

She blanches slightly, then recovers as her cheeks skew a color red that's noticeable even under the artificial lighting. "You're sweet, and kinda hot in a tough-guy, I'll beat your ass if you look at me wrong, way. Even if you're just trying to get up my incredibly-too short skirt. But, I don't think my husband would appreciate me hanging out with another man. He can be a bit... territorial."

My stomach drops when she says she has a husband. She's not wearing a ring, so I'd no idea

she's married, but I nod and hold both hands up. I'm not about that life. I get into enough scraps as it is. I don't need to be drawing the negative energy of a gorgeous woman's jealous husband. "My apologies, miss. Hopefully no harm done, the exception being maybe to my ego. It could apparently stand to get knocked down a peg or two. I had no intentions of flirting with a happily married woman."

She nods, but her expression remains unchanged. She takes my empty glass from me and turns to go, but pauses for a moment to look over her shoulder at me, offering me a sad, but genuine smile as she replies, "I never said I was happily married, Storm. Just married... happily ever after doesn't exist in the real world...."



THREE

Poppy

The rest of the night blurs into itself. It's just another typical Tuesday night in Atlantic City. Not that anything about working in a casino is typical, but spring break is coming. Before long, my nights

are going to be slammed with activity. There will be dozens of underage kids trying to sneak in every night. Our security staff is top-notch, but a couple always manage to slip through. The young adults will be here to throw caution to the wind and party like their livers will forgive them the next day. Here's a hint: your liver never forgives you.

I learned that the hard way on my twenty-first birthday when my husband had to carry me home so I could pray to the porcelain God all night. Of course, that was back when he still somewhat cared if I kept breathing. He'd probably leave me there to choke on my vomit now. Well, maybe not. He's too proud to leave his property out where others can see it, or God forbid, touch it.

The problem with a place like the Wonderland Casino is that they don't close. It's a twenty-four-hour establishment and the wells flow continuously. That means that any Joe Schmo off the street can walk in the front door, plop himself down at a penny slots machine and get himself completely toasted in a couple hours' time, and all it will cost him is about fifty bucks if he plays the slots well. We've been instructed not to serve more than four alcoholic drinks to any guest in an hours' time, but we can't all keep an eye on every guest. If they leave our section, their tally basically starts over, and they can shmooze their way to another round of drinks on a fresh clock.

We have the right to refuse to serve anyone for any reason, but a refusal to serve is a guarantee that you're not getting a tip. We make an okay wage, but the minimum doesn't jump up to fifteen dollars an hour for another five years. Until then, if I want to escape my personal marriage hell, I've

got to milk every man that walks in here for everything they're worth.
Most of the clientele that I
serve tip a dollar a drink. If I serve twenty guys, two drinks each and
every single one of them tips,
that's only about forty dollars an hour. At that rate, it's gonna take me
months to build a nest egg big
enough to let me leave Brad.

Which makes me think back to the enormous tip that was generously
given to me by the MMA
fighter. I don't know why he tipped me so well, but he was adamant
that I take it. He tipped enough
for almost thirty people over the course of two hours! And I all I did
was bring him a lousy club
soda. He was cute too, I won't lie. A little banged up, sure, but he gets
into fights on purpose for a
living. A few bruises is just part of the equipment for a job like that.
I've heard of him, too, but I've never seen him fight.

I don't enjoy watching grown men beat the crap out of each other, but
to each their own. He's not
sitting there criticizing me for prancing around in a dress meant for a
grade schooler for tips, so I
really have no right to judge him for fighting for his supper. Now that
he's fighting here in Atlantic
City, maybe I should see if Brad will take me to a fight. Sure, I don't
necessarily like the violence, but a girl could get lost just watching a man
like that move.

I don't know a lot about what Braxton Storm *is*, but there's one thing
he isn't and that's ugly. If the man wasn't busy knocking other people's
teeth out while trying to keep his own, he'd be
downright attractive, and I only saw him close up briefly earlier when
taking him his club soda. For
most of our encounter, I felt like I was in the presence of a rockstar
hiding from his rabid fans. He

kept that hoodie pulled so tightly around his face, that at times, all I could see was his smile and his

too-perfect teeth. They have to be replacements, because I saw the promotional poster for his round

of fights at the casino, and he was definitely missing one of those in the picture they chose. Not that I examined it that closely, but it's hard to miss a fifty-foot-tall banner with an attractive man on it.

To be fair, that poster didn't do the man justice. Tonight in the casino, he seemed quiet and

reserved, and something about him drew me in like a moth to a flame. He was kind and overly

generous, sure, but he also exuded a masculinity that Brad could only ever hope to achieve. Storm

didn't even have to *do* anything to make my insides tingle with interest. I guess Brad had that effect on me once too, but the two couldn't be more different. Brad is tall and lanky, rocking skinny jeans

and polos with his perfectly trimmed brown hair framing a face full of chiseled cheekbones and cold, blue eyes.

Storm, on the other hand, isn't an enormous guy, but he's big enough to make Brad look like a

high schooler. Whereas Brad is clean cut and debonair, Storm is scruffy in every way possible. He

has a mustache and a beard and a head full of luscious, black, curly hair that reaches his shoulders,

though he had it pulled back tonight into something resembling a man bun. It'd look ridiculous on

most men, but it somehow works for him. Apparently, he fights with it down so that it flies wildly

around his head. At least, that's what I've heard. I couldn't tell what color his eyes were, because I

didn't get close enough to him, but from the promotional posters, I know they're a shade lighter than

honey, almost an amber color just like his skin.

I'm completely lost in my daydream when I feel a cold hand on my wrist. I snatch it away and

look up in surprise to see a pair of familiar blue eyes staring down at me. Blushing, I rub my wrist

where he grabbed me, and he grunts, an unforgiving sneer twisting his otherwise handsome features. I

shiver as the realization hits me that the fight must be over. And Brad looks like he's ready to rip

someone's spine out Mortal Kombat-style. I don't know what the odds were tonight, and I couldn't

pick good ones if they stared me in the face, but I can tell from the way Brad is huffing that whatever

happened, it isn't what he wanted to happen.

"I need a drink," he growls, digging into my apron where I keep my tips. Old habits die hard. It

may be my first day back on the job, but Brad knows me too well. I used to always keep my tips in

the front left pocket of my apron, right where those three twenties plus a couple dozen singles are

resting right now.

He pulls out a wad of cash and his sneer softens into a snide smile. He flips through the cash and

nods, "Well at least one of us made some money tonight. That no good fighter threw the match, and

now Crosby's breathing down my neck about the four to one odds we posted up. Storm was supposed

to win, hands-down. We'd even pegged the fight to only last three rounds before he got a knock-out.

Yeah, well, he got a knock-out alright. A light welterweight knocked out his lights at the start of round two. Two-time Worlds' champion goes down like that in round two... fucking hell, he'll be lucky if

the house breaks even on that match!"

Brad's voice is almost shrill as he finishes, taking my tips and wadding them up in his fist before

he shoves them back down into my apron. Oh well, at least I'll get a proper paycheck, too.

"Come on, wife. I've had a shitty night at work. Let's get a few beers and some dinner. Maybe

you can shake your ass at our waiter and get us some free dessert. Unless of course, you want me to

throw *you* on the table and have a snack of your pussy. A little chocolate sauce drizzled all between your lips... it'll be like an ice cream sundae."

I shudder. I can't smell his breath from here, but my guess is he's already started drinking...

again. He's acting crude, well, cruder than normal, but I know there's no point in arguing with him

over dinner. We're either going to a restaurant, or he's going to take his frustrations out on me in the car once we leave the casino. He gets sadistic when he's angry, so the more I keep him in public, the

more likely I'll end this night with a shred of dignity intact.

"Dinner sounds nice," I murmur, trying to placate his raving down to a level where *half* of the

security staff is watching us. I grab his hand like we're high-school sweethearts again and pour it on

strong. "Come on, baby. Don't stress over work. You can't help what a no-good two-bit fighter does

in the ring. Let's get some drinks and have a nice, quiet dinner out."

Brad stops huffing long enough to actually look at me, his eyes wide like he's shocked I agreed.

He stops his howling and nods as he looks down at our joined hands. The sadistic look fades from

his face, but I know that the smile that takes its place is fake. Fake for the benefit of the handful of security guards who are still watching us. He leads me out of the gambling floor where someone just

hit what sounds to be some sort of small jackpot. It's obviously been a rough night for the house, too.

Thankfully, we don't have to walk far to get to the restaurant that's located inside the casino,

away from the gambling floor where half a dozen young families are seated around the six-top tables,

waiting for upscale casual fare to be brought out from the kitchen. The place isn't a top-of-the-line

steak house where they cut yours fresh in front of you, but it's a place where Brad and I have been

coming for years. So far, it's also the only place in Atlantic City where Brad hasn't gotten us kicked out and banned.

We're led to the back wall of the restaurant and seated with other young couples at a two-top

table with lighting designed to create ambiance. Neither Brad nor I wear our wedding rings anymore,

so the hostess probably assumes we're a young couple in love and out on a date ahead of Spring

Break. Once upon a time maybe, but now we're just two people who can barely stand one another,

going through the motions of day to day marital life.

As the young, pimple-faced waiter approaches, Brad tenses. If there's one thing he hates more

than me looking at other guys, it's other guys looking at me. The irony that he designed the very outfit I'm wearing isn't lost on me either. He's silently seething as the young boy introduces himself and

turns to me first to take my drink order. Brad snaps his fingers to get the boy's attention before I can get a single word out of my mouth. "My wife will have a water. I'll have a vodka tonic on the rocks and a Coors Light."

I sigh at his intrusiveness and shake my head, correcting Brad, "Oh, I'm sorry. My husband was

mistaken, hon. I think I'd actually like sweet tea with extra sugar. Can you do that for me?"

I bat my eyes at the waiter, and he swallows hard, his gaze bouncing back and forth between

Brad and I. “So that’ll be a sweet tea, a vodka tonic, and a Coors Light? Do you mind waiting on the

sweet tea? We don’t usually have it pre-sweetened, but we can make some if you’d like, ma’am.”

I shudder at his usage of the word ma’am. I’m probably not even three years older than this kid,

yet he’s throwing out respect like I’ve got one foot in the grave. To be fair, I *am* married to Brad, so it’s kinda the same thing. I nod and plaster on my best beauty queen smile. “That would be fantastic,

dear. I don’t mind waiting at all. We’re certainly in no hurry, are we *dear?* ”

Brad ignores me, keeping his gaze glued to the door we just came through not five minutes ago.

Great, he’s already scoping out a future conquest. Just keep his attention anywhere but on me, and

maybe I won’t have to endure Brad’s “marital expectations” tonight. Once a day is more than enough.

I don’t think I’d complain if it became once a week or never again for that matter. Having sexual

relations with my husband turns my stomach any way I look at it, but my curiosity is piqued. I turn

around in my seat and from across the room my gaze locks with a pool of molten honey that’s staring

back at me... and everything in my world shifts.



FOUR

Storm

Coming to in a stark, white room with both your manager and trainer hovering over you is never

a good sign. Sure, I've been knocked out before, but I've always woken up to the deafening roar of

the arena all around me, not the near-silence of a blindingly bright room. My manager, Peter, is

standing over me with a concerned look on his face. I blink a couple more times, breathing a sigh of

relief when the hazy edges of my vision start to sharpen.

"You look worried, Pete. Surely that guy couldn't have made me an uglier motherfucker than I already was."

Peter crosses his arms across his chest and shakes his head, glancing to my trainer, Joe. Joe

returns to the look of concern, then turns to me. "Storm, you went down hard that time. Rocket landed

a stone-cold kick to the side of your head and out went your lights. You dropped to that floor faster

than a wet bag of concrete... and you didn't get back up."

My brain is still a bit fuzzy, but even with only half my wits working, I can read between the

lines. I sit up too fast and wince as a familiar, thundering pain flashes through my head.

Peter jumps to my side and grabs hold of my shoulders, easing me back down onto my back on

the makeshift table. “Whoa there, partner. No sudden moves. Not unless you want to revisit that Taco

Hell you had for dinner.”

I cringe and grip his arm as the wave of nausea crashes into me. “Too late,” I murmur as I retch

in his direction. He yelps and jumps out of the way, but not before I splash his imported shoes with

chunks of a semi-digested mass of what was once Ninja Tacos. They burn like hell going down and

they burn like hell coming back up.

Peter stumbles back from me, slapping his hand over his own mouth. That’s right. I forgot he has

a weak stomach. His eyes are bugging out over his hand as he motions to the door. I wave my hand

around aimlessly in the air to let him know he should go. It’s not like there’s anything he can do for me now, anyway.

Joe sighs beside me and asks, “Feel better?”

I turn my gaze to him and shake my head, my long curls whipping back and forth around my face.

“Not particularly. Should I?”

He shrugs and hands me a bottled water, which I crack open and promptly drain. His expression

looks grim as he replies, “Not particularly, but it confirms what I suspected.”

I swipe the back of my hand across my mouth, and I'm sure my gaze would be burning a hole in

him if that kind of thing was possible. "Out with it, doc. What're we looking at?"

Joe sighs and shakes his head. "Truthfully, Storm? Retirement."

I cough in surprise and crush the empty water bottle in my fist, shaking my head again. "No way.

I'm too young to throw in the towel just yet. I've still got a few years in me yet."

Joe levels his gaze at me. "Not if you take another hit or two like that. Storm, you went down

hard. In fact, now that you're awake, I need to check you for secondary injuries, but you know what

we're talking about here. It's not normal to be out for over half an hour like that. You know it. I know it. The twelve thousand fans who saw that hit happen know it. We carted you out after you'd been

down for fifteen minutes, and by my watch, you've been down thirty-seven. The next hit you take could be your last."

I wave him off. "Hit, schmit. That was a blind, lucky ass kick, and we both know it. Rocket

don't usually fight like that. I'm surprised to see him getting dirty."

Joe shrugs. "When in Rome..."

I roll my eyes. "I know I fight dirty, Joe. It's what kept me in the game this long, but I thought

men like Rocket had honor or some other bullshit like that, and they stuck to legal moves?"

Joe pulls out his clipboard. "Use of colorful and varied language, check."

Heaving out a breath, I grumble, “Really? I’m sitting here complaining like a Prima Donna, and

you’re just gonna go over the concussion checklist? Look, I can wiggle all ten fingers and toes, too.”

I give him an annoyed look as I demonstrate, wiggling my fingers first, then lifting one foot to wiggle

the toes. Except they don’t wiggle when I command them to. Not until the third try, anyway.

Joe makes another big check mark on his clipboard, but his expression is grim. “Look, Storm. I

know this is your bread and butter, fights like these. But the next hit you take might cause some

permanent nerve damage... if it hasn’t already...” He looks pointedly at my stubborn foot, so I stick

the other right in his face and wiggle the toes in defiance. He nods and put another checkmark on the

paper on his clipboard.

“I’m not your momma, Storm. I can’t tell you what to do, but I am telling you this as a medical

professional... and as your friend... if you go back out into that arena again Friday night, you’re going

to be playing with fire. It may not happen then and it may not happen next week, but eventually, your

luck is going to run out, and you’re going to take a hit that will end your career... and you’ll be lucky

if that’s all it takes away from you. The next hit could be the one, Storm. You’re already showing signs of—”

I hold one hand up to him and put the other to my forehead, rubbing my face back and forth over

the skin that’s calloused from years of fighting — both in the arena and not. “Yeah, I know, Joe.

CTE... whatever the fuck that means. You said yourself there's no guarantee that it'll even affect me
down the road. Why should I give up a lucrative career for something that *might* happen? Nothing
else I could ever do in this world is going to make me the kind of money fighting does. And let's be
frank, you know me almost as well as I know myself. I'm going to be fighting whether I'm in the arena
or not, so I may as well get paid for it."

Joe rests his hand on my shoulder and pulls out his miniature flashlight, shining it back and forth
between my eyes as I glare at him. "While that may be true, I cannot with good conscience, give you
a clean bill of health. Your pupils are blown man, I'm gonna have to call an ambulance."

I growl under my breath, but Joe cuts me off. "I'm not playing games, Storm. You took a nasty
hit. You hired me to protect your health, and that includes protecting you from yourself. You need to
get checked out. Get a CT, make sure there's not a brain bleed somewhere. Don't make me be an
asshole and call your father. You went down and didn't get back up. I should've called the
paramedics right then. You've vomited, your pupils are fixed and dilated, and I'd bet my left nut right
now you've got a headache the size of Texas. You're just too damn stubborn to admit it."

I wince, because he's right. The undulating thumping is running around my head like a cat on
speed, but that's nothing new. I've had headaches for years now. They come and go and they vary in
intensity, but nobody's ever acted like they're a big deal. Now, I puke up diarrhea-inducing tacos,

and everybody's panicking. I shake my head. "I'm not going to a hospital, and I'll fight anyone that tries to force me..."

I trail off slowly, and Joe opens his mouth to argue, but I cut him off. "However... I'll let you call them here. They can check me over and what not, and if it's truly an emergency, then I'll take the damn ambulance ride. Deal?"

Joe looks like he's pussyfooting around the issue, so I emphasize, "It's that, or I walk out of this fucking room and go about my business, which includes fighting Friday night."

With a defeated grunt, Joe backs away from me, pulling out his cell phone and making a call. I

can tell he's pissed off at me right now, but I don't care. It's my way or no way. That's the *only* way.

It's how I've survived all these years being a mixed kid in a city that's still racially divided. Not that my home life growing up was a bad one. My mother took off when I was six, never to be seen or

heard from again. But my father's been my rock. He raised me up the best way he knew how, and he did a damn fine job of it, too.

It's not his fault I have a temper like a hurricane. It just seemed fitting that my last name was

Storm - made for a good fighting name. When my father realized I wasn't gonna stop getting into

fights, he put me into martial arts to try to channel all of my angry outbursts into something productive.

He wanted to quell the tempest in his young son... but I learned early that while fighting on the streets

didn't get me very far, fighting in the arena could make me a superstar. And it has.

Ask anyone on the MMA circuit about me, and they'll tell you I'm a skilled fighter, if a little unpredictable. I've been selling out fights since before MMA was viewed as cool. There's kids on the street just like me that are counting on me to prove that no matter where we start, anyone can become someone if they put in the effort. Even a kid from the wrong side of the tracks who never really fit in on either side of the race war.

"You gotta promise me, kid... whatever they say, you'll listen."

I roll my eyes and tilt my head to the side, groaning, "Fine... but only because I like you. If you were just any Joe-Schmo and not *my* Joe, I'd have already punched you in the nose, anyway."

Joe grunts as there's a knock on the door. "That must be them. It's good to know you care, kid, but I'm not the one who needs a wake up call."

It takes the paramedics, a couple of young guns with plenty to prove, about fifteen minutes to give me the full workup. While they agree that I'm displaying early signs of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE for those of you with a high-school education like me, I'm a bit disappointed to hear them agree with Joe. But I'm not alarmed. They didn't tell me I couldn't fight. They just told me that I have to be careful *if* I choose to continue fighting. *If*... ha, like I could walk away from this contract anyway.

Even if I could, there's a half dozen more like it waiting in the wings. I may not be able to sell out Vegas, but I can sell out a venue. Of course I'm gonna fight. I'm a fighter — it's what I do. I did

promise Joe that when this six weeks is up, I'll look into taking a hiatus. They're not unheard of,
especially in the MMA circuit. You can only get your brain knocked around so many times before you
gotta take a breather.

Because of my promise, and only because of it, he's agreed to let me finish out my six week
engagement here. It's not like I'll be fighting every night, anyway. I only fight twice a week, so I'll
have several days to let this migraine subside and gain my bearings before I face off against The
Rocket again. And this time, I'll know what to expect. Apparently, he's joined the dark side with me
and gone dirty. Which just means I'll have to fight even dirtier. But that's fine with me. There's moves
in my arsenal I haven't used in a while that could stand to be dusted off.

I'll worry about strategy later. I've got three days to figure out my new plan of attack. What
needs my attention immediately is my now-empty stomach, since I puked up the greasy dinner I ate
earlier. By the way, Peter's shoes will survive. Can't say if his patience for me will, too, but I guess only time will tell. For now, I'm off to the casino restaurant to get some grub and try to numb this
excruciating migraine with the experimental drug Joe got me into a trial for and gorge myself on the
joint's double-fudge chocolate cherry cake.

Yeah, I know. Most men would drink away their sorrows, but I don't like the way that shit makes
me feel. At least the cake and I have always parted on good terms. I may feel a bit heavier in the
morning, but it's nothing a good run and a lot of bag punching can't work off. Besides, I've got a few

days to make myself sweat to make sure I stay in the Welterweight category.

I'm humming to myself as I walk into the restaurant. I scan the crowd to see if anyone here might

recognize me, but this doesn't seem to be the kind of crowd who likes watching grown men beat the

shit out of each other. Nah, this seems more like families and young couples canoodling in the casino.

Until my eyes land on a familiar face - the bookie that I probably just cost a few grand, at least.

I'd be willing to bet the house lost a small fortune on that fight, and he probably lost out on ten or

twelve grand in bonuses if I'd won . Easy peasy, guaranteed win is what they were saying. Oops. I

guess everybody fucks up royally from time to time. Boy, does he *not* look pleased to see me. In fact, if his heaving shoulders are any indication, he's about to Hulk out right here in the restaurant. Maybe

I should find another place to make myself sick on sweets.

I'm not scared of a scrawny dude like him, but I'm also not about to get into a fight in the middle

of a restaurant full of young kids and impressionable teens. Especially since the bookie's here with a

date. No sense in getting a woman involved in a dude's squabble. I'm about to turn around and leave

the restaurant when the woman sitting across from him turns around, and I find myself staring into the

concerned face of the cocktail waitress from earlier who took my breath away. Shit...



FIVE

Poppy

Seeing Braxton Storm standing in the entrance to the restaurant where Brad insisted we come is

both surprising and a bit intimidating. The only time I've seen the man in person, he was sitting in a

chair. No, I take that back... based on the enormous form that fills my vision, he was most definitely

slouching down into that chair so far, I'm surprised he didn't slide out of it on his ass. This dude is

enormous. He's not muscle-bound like a bodybuilder, but he most definitely has muscles for days.

Long, languid muscles that are on full display between the joggers slung low on his body and the

loose tank top that's barely clinging to life on his body.

My guess is he's probably just been released by the casino's medical team. Brad's spent the last

several minutes droning on about how Storm threw the fight and faked an injury. But from what I

heard whispered around the employee break room, Storm didn't just go down; he went down hard and

didn't get back up. I drag my eyes away from the man whose attention is still on me and turn back to

Brad. "Look at the guy, Brad. There's no way he faked that. He still looks dazed."

Brad frowns, slamming his fist down on the table. The silverware clatters around and one fork

jumps off the table and bounces up under Brad's chair. The rest of the sparse dishes rattle around as

Brad continues to grumble about cheaters and liars and some other crap that I tune out. "Ugh, Brad,

get over it already. He lost the fight, so what," I interrupt him and you'd think I told him I ran over his dog with the look of betrayal that blooms on his face.

I roll my eyes at him and turn back around to find that Storm has disappeared. I feel a pang of

guilt bubble in my stomach. It quickly evaporates as Brad leans across the table and grabs my wrists

so tightly that it hurts. I yelp and whirl around to give him a look that could wither a cactus. "Ow

Brad, let go. That hurts."

Brad narrows his eyes at me. "So are you thinking about fucking him?"

I yank one of hands back across the table and grab an errant fork from beside my plate. I narrow

my eyes right back and glance down at the hand of his that's still firmly wrapped around my wrist.

"What? No, you nincompoop. When would I have time to worry about having sex with someone

else? You're either on top of me or talking about being on top of me. I haven't had sex with anyone

but you, Brad. Now let *go*..."

Brad growls and yanks on my wrist, pulling me halfway across the table. As he does, my
untouched glass of wine spills over, staining the pristine white tablecloth underneath the basket of
rolls he forbade me from eating. He throws my hand back at me as he scoots his chair out from the
table to avoid getting wine on his uniform. "Look what you made me do, Poppy!"

I sit up in my chair and scoot it out from the table too, my chest heaving from the shock of nearly
being dragged onto the table. The jubilant chatter that was humming throughout the restaurant has
quieted now to a low murmur, like whispered words of concern that nobody can seem to raise their
voice to say.

I can feel the eyes of the other patrons on me as men and women alike turn to stare in our
direction. I hold up a hand and laugh nervously, swatting at the air, "Oh, I am so clumsy! My, look what I've gone and done now. No worries, folks! Y'all go back to your dinners and we'll get this mess cleaned up."

I close my eyes, fighting back tears as a small child's voice rings out in the silence, "Mommy,
why'd the man try to put the lady on the table? Was he gonna eat her?"

I stifle down a sniffle and open my eyes, praying my mascara isn't running from the wetness in
my eyes. I glare across the table at Brad, but he seems nonplussed by the scene we're making.

Several people are still cautiously staring at us and the waiters from the restaurant have gathered near
the swinging kitchen door. It's a stare down between myself and our young waiter, who is poised

with a phone in his hands. I shake my head quickly, silently pleading with him not to make the phone call I know he wants to make. The phone call he *should* make.

“You know, on second thought, I’m not all that hungry. Let’s just go home, Brad. The wine was lovely, but I think I’m feeling a bit tired and I’d like to lie down.”

I reach into my apron and pull out the seventy-four dollars in tips I got tonight, including the sixty from Storm, and drop it onto the table as I attempt to mop up the dark red mess pooling in the center of the table. Brad stands up out of his chair with huff, “Fine, you’ve gone and ruined my appetite anyway. I swear, Poppy, I can’t take you anywhere. You’re like an animal. It’s a wonder you’re even housebroken.”

I close my eyes as I inhale and exhale slowly, trying to keep a lid on my own temper. There’s no point in giving Brad what he wants and that’s a fight. I sigh and toss the handful of napkins that I’ve been trying to clean the table with onto its surface. “Fine, just please keep your voice down. People are staring.”

Brad tosses both of his hands in the air, letting go of the fork in his hand that sails across the table and bounces off of me. I wince in response. Even though it doesn’t hurt by any means, it’s still startling to have an object essentially thrown at you by your angry husband. Brad growls as he skirts around the table and snatches my arm, “Let’s go.”

Though the previous chatter of the dining room has resumed, I can still feel dozens of eyes on me,

watching my every move. I look beyond Brad and see a young girl, maybe ten or twelve, watching me with piqued interest. Her mother is snapping her fingers in front of her face, trying to get her to turn around and stop staring, but her eyes are glued to us. Time stands still and for a moment, and I'm a kid again, watching the scene that Brad and I are making in this restaurant. I'm learning right now how a man will treat a woman.

I blink and I'm thrown back into my body, a searing pain tracking up my arm from where Brad has a death-grip on my wrist. I shake my head quickly, my voice barely above a whisper as I mutter, "No."

Brad recoils like I've slapped him, but he doesn't let go of my arm. Instead, he digs his manicured fingernails into my skin, causing tears to prick at my eyes. "What did you say?"

I swallow and shake my head, taking several steps back from Brad, but I can't go far. He refuses to let go of me, so I raise my voice. "I said no. No, I won't come home with you. You're drunk, Brad. And you're hurting me."

Brad snarls as he lets go of my arm like he just got electrocuted. "Fine, bitch, but where are you gonna go, huh? You gonna go screw that guy you were flirting with at work earlier? And you wonder why I stumble into the beds of other women. It takes a cheater to know one."

I gasp as Brad levels his accusations. My voice is quiet, but close to hysterical as I respond, "You're blaming *me* for your behavior?"

Brad takes one step towards me and raises his hand. I duck behind both of my hands, but the impact I expect to feel from his hand never comes. I do hear a lot of chairs scraping and women gasping as there's a flurry of activity around me. I open my eyes to find a solid wall of man between me and Brad. I peer around the man who's blocking me from Brad and see that several men have restrained Brad and are leading him out of the restaurant as he continues to spit insults at me. "I don't care where you go, Poppy... but don't you dare come back to *my* house. You'll find the door locked."

I just stand there dumbly, my eyes closed tightly as I helplessly try to force back the tears that threaten to stream down my cheeks. Gentle hands come to rest on my shoulders and I tense up at the touch. "Don't cry for him. He isn't worth it."

My eyes fly open in surprise as I recognize the voice. "Storm? Why are you here? What are you doing?"

Storm motions to one of the waiters, then whispers in his ear when the boy gets close enough to him. The waiter nods and murmurs, "Follow me."

I know I must look a fright right now, but Storm just stands there and waits until I finally begin to shuffle my feet in the direction of where the waiter disappeared. He cautiously rests a hand big enough to be a paw against the middle of my back and though I tense up when he touches me, I let him guide me into the secluded room the waiter ushers us towards.

Storm pulls a chair out from the impeccably set table and motions for me to sit down. "Water?"

Wine? A dartboard with that jerk's face on it?"

I sit down and swipe at my face, smearing some of my makeup as I laugh nervously. "Water's fine. I hate wine."

Storm turns to the waiter and nods. "A water for the lady. You know what, make that two. And a giant slice of that double-chocolate cherry cake. With two forks."

The waiter bows his head silently and disappears from the room. Silence falls over the room as Storm sits down across from me, his mouth set into a thin line.

I know I probably look a fright right about now, but something about Storm's unassuming gesture of offering me a tissue sets my frazzled nerves at ease. "Thanks," I murmur, laughing at how stupid I must look as I dab at my raccoon eyes. "He's not always like that, you know."

Storm nods solemnly, but doesn't say anything for several minutes. Finally, when the silence becomes too unbearable, I start into my normal apologetic spiel. "I'm sorry you had to see that. It must have looked like we were bad actors rehearsing for a play that's guaranteed to be a dud."

Storm doesn't reply. He just keeps his expression stern as he watches me lie through my teeth.

And I suspect that, judging by the arch of his eyebrows, he's not buying one bit of it.

He clears his throat as the waiter brings in two glasses of water and the most enormous piece of cake I've ever seen. I can tell that Storm's not impressed by what just happened, or my attempts to

smooth things over like they never happened, but when that cake hits the table, I hear his stomach growl and he chuckles softly, apologizing, “Uh, sorry about that. My dinner didn’t exactly... sit well with me, so I’m starving. And this cake... it’s the perfect for all kinds of evil.”

I nod nervously and motion to the cake, “Don’t hold back on my account. Seriously, this cake will make you forget about all your troubles, at least while it’s still in your mouth.”

Storm reaches across the table and places a fork in my hand. I flinch when he touches me, but try to play it off with the fakest laugh to ever tumble out of my mouth. He frowns and nods at the cake, but I shake my head and put the fork back down on the table. “I can’t... do you know how many calories are in that? Brad would...”

Lightning flashes across Storm’s face as his expression becomes thunderous. “Brad? The asshole’s name is *Brad*? That’s not nearly pretentious enough for that prick. Please tell me that wasn’t your husband...”

I smile nervously, sucking in a breath through my teeth and Storm yanks his hand back across the table, balling it into a fist. “You don’t deserve a man like that...”

I gasp and look up at him in shock. He sounds exactly like Brad sounds when he’s trying to knock me down a peg or two. Storm frowns and shakes his head. “That’s not what I meant. No woman deserves to be treated like that.”

I gulp, dreading the answer I know he’s going to give me, but I ask the question anyway. “Like

what?”

Storm shakes his head as he grabs his own fork, then motions to mine on the table again. “Like trash. His actions were not those of a man in love. They were the actions of a man in possession of something he’s afraid to lose.”

I swallow hard and nod slightly, picking the fork up in my hand and twisting it around in my fingers. Storm’s voice is gentle, but firm as he insists, “Try the cake, Poppy. Misery calories don’t count.”

I can’t help but laugh nervously at his words. I nod and stab at the cake with the fork, “Fine. I’ll try it for your sake, but don’t expect me to...” I trail off as I pop the fork into my mouth and the flavor explodes on my tongue. I chew hastily and stare at Storm in shock. Finally, I get my mouth working right again and exclaim, “Holy crap, that’s good!”

Storm nods. “Told you.” He cuts off a large chunk of the cake and scoots it off onto a napkin, then pushes the plate across the table to me. “I love this place for their cake. Every time I’m in Atlantic City, I get this cake. Truthfully, it’s the only thing I’ve ever eaten here. It will take me three hours to work it off tomorrow, but I could use a good run anyway. Enjoy it. You seem like you could use something good in your life right about now.”



SIX

Storm

Watching Poppy scarf down the cake like she's been starved is almost alarming. She's not overly

skinny, but a few pounds on her lithe frame probably wouldn't even show. And after the display I just

witnessed between her and that jerk, it makes me wonder what the fucker does behind closed doors.

He certainly wasn't very restrained with all those people watching. I shudder to think what kind of

abuse she's been subjected to if that's her husband. Maybe he was just an overzealous co-worker? I

know it's wishful thinking at its best and it's probably none of my business, but if there's one thing I

absolutely cannot *stand* in this world, it's a man that uses force to get what he wants.

She polishes off the rest of the cake on the plate and sits back in the chair, her eyes wide as a

smile slowly creeps across her face. "That... was... the best cake I've ever had!"

I nod and push the piece I'd portioned off for myself over to her. "I know, here, finish it up."

She shakes her head, looking almost alarmed. "Oh my gosh, I couldn't! You said you came here just for the cake and you haven't even had a bite yet..."

I shrug and push the napkin all the way over to her, patting her hand gently as I nod at her. "You need it more than I do. Besides, I've kinda lost my appetite."

She nods solemnly and pokes at the cake for a minute with her fork before her resolve crumbles and she digs into the rest of the piece. I wait until her mouth is full of cake before I pry. "So... Jerky McFuckFace... is he the husband you mentioned having?"

She stops chewing for a moment and her eyes dart to mine. They're swirling with emotions, and if I'm seeing things correctly, colors too. They almost seem to morph right in front of me. I could be seeing things, too. I did just take a nasty kick to the head that worried the unshakable Joe King to the core. He's seen a *lot* of injuries, including my own, and I've never seen him worried like that. The one thing that's undeniable though, is that Poppy's kaleidoscope eyes are wet with unshed tears. No man should make a woman cry. But that's exactly what's about to happen.

Poppy snuffles softly as she swallows down the bite of cake before shoveling another forkful into her mouth. She's doing her damndest not to have to talk to me, but shit, if this woman cries, I'm done for. I cannot stand to see a woman cry. Especially not when I can see written all over her face the reason why.

I sigh, dragging a hand up over my jaw, then back down again. “Don’t cry, please. I’ll stop asking questions if you promise not to cry.”

She bursts into a nervous laughter as she finishes up the cake. “Tough man can’t watch a woman express emotions?”

I shake my head quickly. “Tough man’s got no problems with emotions. Tough man doesn’t handle seeing a woman hurt by a man who’s supposed to love her and honor her and protect her. If those tears were happy tears, tough man wouldn’t have a problem, but we both know they’re not. You shouldn’t shed a single tear for that bastard. Husband or not, he’s an asshole.”

She drops the fork to the table and looks at me seriously as she swipes at her eyes. Damnit. “I’m not crying.” She waves her hands in front of her face in a desperate attempt to fan herself, but I can see from the way her delicate features twist in agony that it’s pointless. She’s gonna cry and I’m gonna have to dig deep not to lose it like a feral beast and track down that jerk and pummel him into the ground.

She sniffs and snorts as she dabs at her eyes with a napkin, reassuring me, “I’m fine. It was just a little argument. I pushed his buttons, that’s all. Really, it’s okay. He’ll be over it tomorrow. Things will be fine tomorrow. They usually are until I screw up again.”

I narrow my eyes at her. There’s a lot of things I could say right now about how things probably won’t be fine, but I barely know this woman. It’s not my place to question her relationship, even

though anyone in this restaurant can see that her husband is a tool. I nod slowly and inhale deeply,

“Okay, so I won’t berate you over how bad of an idea I think it is for you to go home. You don’t need

me to point out the obvious to you. I will, however, offer you a ride anywhere you want to go, even if

it’s back to that... “ I stop myself before I say something I might regret, “...to him.”

She watches me with bated breath. I can only hope that she’s considering my offer. She finally

nods slowly. “I’ll take the ride, but I’m not a complete idiot. I’m not going anywhere near my

husband tonight. Can you take me somewhere to forget him, even if it’s just for an hour?”

My gut clenches at her words and I nod immediately before even considering what she’s asking.

I pull out a twenty dollar bill and lay it down on the table with a smirk, “What did you have in mind?”

She shrugs and stands up quickly, a gleam in her eye as she motions all around her. “We have the

entirety of the Wonderland to explore, or we can go escape the ridiculousness of how this place has

cornered us and let us down, and go anywhere you want.”

I stand too and nod, a grin cracking my otherwise tough exterior. “Anywhere, huh?”

Poppy smiles, “Maybe not to play croquet in the middle of the night. That would be absurd, but

half of Atlantic City is open twenty-four hours a day. The world is our oyster and all that jazz.”

I cross my arms over my chest as I watch her excitement grow.
“You’re not the least bit worried
about going off with a strange man to unknown places?”

She shrugs and steps around the table, grabbing hold of my arm. She
pats my bicep as a softness
infiltrates her voice. “I’ve already proven I have horrible taste in men.
You seem to have your head
mostly on straight and I know you’ve got a contract here in
Wonderland worth more than anything you
could possibly do to me. If I go with you and you’re a total asshole,
then I’m par for the course. If
you’re not, then you just prove that there *are* men who know how to
treat a woman like a proper
lady.”

I shudder at her touch, but play it off as I shift around to dig into my
pocket for my keys. “I don’t
know about being all proper like having a tea party or anything, but I
know a great little hippie joint
that has some killer hookah... and I bet the owner could whip you up
some tea if that’s your fancy.
He’s a pretty chill dude. Helps me with some of the side-effects of my
fighting. I think you’ll like
him.”

Poppy nods with a grin. “Well, then, Mr. Storm... lead the way.”

She walks quietly in step beside me to the parking garage where I
stashed my ride in the
employee parking. I’m aware I could’ve given her to the valet, but
sometimes, they get a bit careless
with her and she’s my baby. Had her since I was sixteen and I don’t
trust just anyone to take care of
her. I click the key fob and Poppy gasps beside me as the lights flicker
on my bike.

She turns to look at me, stopping suddenly in her tracks. “You have a motorcycle?”

I nod dumbly, like it shocks me that she hadn't figured this out. “Is that a problem?”

I shrug and walk over to the saddlebags attached to the back of the bike, glancing over my shoulder to see she's slowly edging closer to the bike. She shakes her head slowly, “What about—?”

I smile and pull out a helmet and toss it to her. She catches it with a soft squeak, then looks up at me. I nod as I wind the wildness of my hair into a ponytail of sorts at the nape of my neck, then secure it with a rubber band. I plunk my own helmet on my head, close up the saddlebags, then throw my right leg over the seat and settle my ass against the supple leather. She tucks her own hair into the top of her uniform and tugs the helmet I tossed her onto her head. Bits of dusty brown peek out around her face as she looks down at what she's wearing. “There's no way I can gracefully get on that thing in *this*...”

I watch her silently as she motions to the sorry excuse for a dress she's wearing. Truthfully, I've seen more clothes on a stripper than her uniform, but it's what all the waitresses at the Wonderland wear. To be honest, I'm surprised they don't have to wear little rabbit ear headbands too. I chuckle and shrug, “Well, are you wearing underwear?”

She gasps as her gaze shoots straight to mine, her cheeks flushing as she stammers, “Uh, I, well, of course! I'm not a two-bit whore looking to cheat on my husband!”

The sound of her saying husband grinds my insides like nails on a chalkboard. I pat the seat

behind me and turn back around, “Then hop on up. You ever ridden a horse?”

She makes a strangled sound as she puts her hand on my left bicep to steady herself, “Lots of times. Grew up riding them.”

I nod and scoot as far forward in the seat as I can, then reply, “Well, you ride a bike just like you ride anything else... horse, man, whatever... you throw one leg over her, digs your knees in until she purrs and hang on tight!”

She slides into the seat behind me as I kick the gear shifter up with the toe of my sneaker half a notch into neutral. I turn the key as she settles in behind me and tentatively rests her hands against my hips. I chuckle and shake my head, then reach around behind myself and grab her hands, tugging them around my waist. Setting her hands against my stomach, I can feel her tense up behind me. Her discomfort makes me tense too, the muscles under her hands rippling.

Before I start the bike, I twist my head around and tell her, “Hold on tight. This baby hits sixty in a matter of seconds.”

She still looks nervous as I reach up and flip down the visor on her helmet, before doing the same to my own. “You don’t wanna swallow any bugs, so keep your mouth closed and lean in close to me. Neither me nor the bike bite.”

Without looking, I run my hand over the starter switch and press it, the bike roaring to life

underneath us. “Just pretend you’re on one of those horses you said you grew up with and trust me. I

may not be a perfect gentleman, but I’m not going to let you get hurt...”



SEVEN

Poppy

Riding on the back of a motorcycle with my arms wrapped around a big, burly MMA fighter is

not how I thought this evening would go. Or my life for that matter. Who dreams of things like that?

This is wrong on so many levels, but right now, Brad can eat a dick for all I care. I’m still shaken to

my core that he lashed out at me in public like that. Sure, he’s been demanding before and he’s never

been particularly gentle with me, but I’ve just convinced myself that’s how Brad is. He’s not a gentle

man and he’s *definitely* no gentleman, but the marriage vows have to count for something, right?

I groan as thoughts ping-pong around my head as I cling tightly to Storm. I have no idea where

we’re going exactly. He mentioned something about a hookah place, so I’m assuming he’s taking me to

a bar? But then again, what kind of bar serves tea. Right now, my head is so crowded with discombobulated thoughts that I need *something* to help sort them out. That deliciously sinful cake that Storm ordered isn't helping matters either because it's like an enormous wad of guilt sitting heavy in my stomach.

I should have just given Brad a few minutes to calm down, then gone home with him. He's never hit me before, so I probably overreacted in the restaurant when he raised his hand. Well, there was that one time when we were newlyweds, but that was an accident and he apologized.

Silently cursing myself, I lean back from Storm slightly, just enough that I no longer feel secure against him. There's air whipping between our bodies, making his already-loose tank top flap in the breeze. My eyes are drawn to the tight lines and sharp angles of his back as his muscles bunch and relax with his movements as he guides the motorcycle along the road. I know I'm practically holding my breath as I cling to his broad body while the breeze bites at my face.

A breeze that is invitingly liberating. I keep my hands pressed firmly against his stomach and dig my knees into his muscular thighs, but I let my center of gravity shift back so that the wind lashes at my body as we speed down some back alley thoroughfare.

The speed limits should probably be thirty down a road like this, but Storm seems nonplussed as we fly down the pavement with little regard for anything around us. Or maybe it just feels like we're flying. Maybe I'm just craving the freedom of flight. The freedom from a life spent as a caged bird,

too afraid to sing and too afraid to escape, even when my owner leaves the door wide open.

I'm still swimming through my thoughts, trying to keep my head afloat inside my head when I feel

the bike slow to a stop. The hard wall of muscles underneath my hands shifts and before I can

comprehend what's going on, I feel Storm step off the bike, then reach back and gently lift me off the

back, setting me down on my feet. He pulls his helmet off and unties the rubber band from his hair,

shaking it out. It's amusing to watch this behemoth of a man shaking out his hair like he's in a Pantene

commercial. And dang, what a commercial that would be...

I snap my attention to Storm as he clears his throat, a smile blooming across his face. "You okay,

there? You seemed to get a little lost in that head of yours for a minute..."

My face flames with embarrassment, but Storm shakes his head at me and pats me on the

shoulder. He points at the flashing neon sign in front of the place where he's parked his bike. The

colors flash between red, pink, and white and scrawled across the middle, in all caps, in the name of

the place - The 'Shroom. "I'm gonna go on in. If you need a minute or two, take it. In fact, take all the time you need. The night is young and so are we. But don't blush or be embarrassed. Everybody in

here has made decisions they want to forget. Nobody is gonna judge you."

I nod slowly as he steps up to the glass door and pushes it open. Before he steps inside, he looks

back at me, his honey-colored irises reflecting the neon lights so that he almost looks like he has red

eyes. He smiles, a big smile that shows all of his teeth, glowing brightly in the bath of light from the neon sign. “Just ask for Cat when you get inside. She’ll know where to find me. And Poppy?”

Swallowing hard, I acknowledge him, “Yeah?”

He shakes his shoulders like he’s loosening up all of his muscles. “Relax. That jerk has no idea where you are, who you’re with, or what you’re doing. Despite being your husband, he doesn’t own you. We’re just a couple friends out for a good time and to find some solace from a world that likes to kick us when we’re down. And you’re not doing anything wrong...”

I watch him as he steps inside the building, the glass door swinging closed with a tinkle of bells.

He’s right. I’m *not* doing anything wrong, but then, why do I feel so guilty following him into a hole-in-the-wall like The ‘Shroom? Then again, my husband just dragged me across a table in a busy restaurant full of kids, then acted like he was a saint proclaiming the Word to the masses. So whose moral compass is really broken here?

It’s high time I did something for myself anyway. Happiness is not something that’s handed to

you on a silver platter. I may have had one dream snatched away from me, but that doesn’t mean there

won’t be more. I just have to put one foot in front of the other and be willing to let doors close, even it means they slam in my face. Besides, as I pull the glass door that Storm disappeared through open,

I’m reminded that there will be other doors. I just have to be willing to take a chance and walk through them.

As I do, I inhale sharply and instantly regret it. Heavy smoke fills my lungs and I double-over as I

feel the breath leave me. I cough and sputter, struggling to pull in a decent breath. Strong arms wrap around me and I feel like I'm floating through the air as everything shifts around me. When the smoke clears and I can open my eyes without feeling like they're being assaulted, I see Storm standing there, looking at me with a sheepish smile on his face.

"Shoulda warned you not to breathe when you first came in. Forgot you didn't grow up in the city. Girl, in Jersey, if you're walking into a building, you don't *ever* take a massive inhale like you did when you walked in. This was just hookah, but some of these places, you just don't know what you're opening yourself up to... come on, I had Cat brew you up some calming tea and she's blending us some hookah that I think you'll like. Cherry vanilla sound good?"

I nod as I thump my fist against my chest, trying to get the burning sensation out of my lungs. I follow along behind him, my feet trudging along. "Is *it* gonna burn like this, too?"

Storm glances over his shoulder at me and shakes his head. "Nah, maybe a little the first time if you've never done it, but it goes in smooth. That mess you got a gulping breath of in the entrance is all kinds of flavors mixed together with people's nasty breath." He chuckles and slides one arm across my lower back protectively, weaving me through the crowd until we come to a quaint area nestled in what appears to be the back of the building. I can't help but laugh when I see that the bar itself is round and looks like it's surrounding a huge tree trunk. Positioned at varying points around the bar and various bar stools shaped like mushrooms.

I point at the stool that Storm leads me to and ask, "Is this why it's called The 'Shroom?"

Storm nods and he slides up onto the stool beside me, then looks expectantly at mine. “One of the reasons, yeah, but I’m sure Cat had some others, isn’t that right Cat?”

I glance behind the bar and see a spry woman walking in my direction. She’s pixie-like in appearance with pinched features and a close-cropped head full of hot pink hair with gray roots.

There’s a hoop hanging out of the middle of her nose, a bar stuck through her eyebrow, and dozens of tattoos running up and down the lengths of her arms.

Despite her older appearance, she moves with a grace that even I can’t claim as she sets a

steaming mug of an amber-colored liquid in front of me. Her voice is gravelly, but soothing as she

murmurs, “Storm here says you’ve had a rough night. And that’s saying something since he took a kick to the head that knocked him out cold, ain’t that right Stormy?”

Storm grumbles, but nods. “Yeah, yeah, Cat... announce it to the world why doncha? Braxton Storm is slipping...”

Cat slings her hand around in the air as she turns her back to me, then turns back around and sets

a mug of identical tea in front of Storm. “Oh, pish posh, boy. You stop with all that self-deprecation

talk. You know I don’t allow that kind of shit in my bar. This... is a happy place. Besides, you cannot

live your life to please others! Now drink up, be merry, get lost in the possibilities of freedom. From what’s expected of you. From what you cannot escape...”

She turns to me and narrows her eyes as she plops a saucer with sugar cubes on it between Storm

and I. She lifts a small tube from under the bar and places it in her mouth, inhaling deeply, then

blowing out the smoke in puffs and finally, a small circle that encloses one of the clouds. “You may

be big, you may be small. You may be important, or not at all. But nobody can define you without truly

getting to know you. So I ask you, Miss...?”

I shudder as she turns her eyes on me, probing for me to answer her question. I clear my throat

and take the tube that holds out to me, inhaling deeply on it. I hold my breath as the smoke infiltrates my lungs, trying not to cough. I attempt to copy her moves of blowing out smalls puffs of smoke, but

by the end of it, I’m coughing all the same. She smiles and gives me a small nod, then hands the tube

off to Storm, who is watching me with piqued interest.

Once I finally stop coughing, I spit out my name, “Poppy. I’m Poppy...”

Cat nods thoughtfully, then muses, “Well, Miss Poppy... you are who you are. You cannot be

something you don’t aspire to be, so do not let the mundane atrocities of your life define your self-

worth. You’re either happy... or you’re not. And if you’re not... the only way to change that, is to

become whoever will make you happy. So, I ask you... Miss Poppy... whooo... are you?”



EIGHT

Storm

Watching Poppy meld in nearly seamlessly with my people is eye-opening. Sure, I figured she'd

probably come into the bar and let loose a little. It's nearly impossible to be around this brand of folk without loosening up a bit, but she is *flourishing*. When I leaned over to tell her after she tried her fifth flavor combination of hookah that I figured it'd be impossible for her to enjoy herself this much,

she responded, quite simply, "Well, sometimes I believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

That retort left me slack-jawed and silent for several minutes until Poppy excused herself to go to

the bathroom and Cat wandered over to me, her features the picture of calm. "What are you doing, boy?"

I blink at Cat, shaking my head and holding my hands up as I puff out the last of the Orange Cream

hookah Cat mixed up for us. “What do you mean? I’m smoking. I’m letting loose, trying to ignore the tambourine that’s fluttering about in my head.”

Cat crosses her arms over her chest and shakes her head, nodding towards the bathroom. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I dismiss her concerns like they’re an errant fly at a summer picnic.

“Come on Cat, I’m just showing the girl a good time. She could use it.”

Cat nod solemnly. “Indeed, she could, but I get the feeling that something is not right with this.

Like she isn't yours to woo.”

My expression falters a bit, my mood teetering down a few notches along with it. “Cat, her husband’s a dick.”

Cat holds up a finger and shakes her head, “But he is *her* dick. I know you’re a grown man,

Storm, but don’t throw away everything you’ve worked for over a girl you can’t have.”

I grumble, rolling my eyes as I refuse to look at Cat’s face. “I’m not trying to have her. Really,

we’re just two people, having a good time... trying to forget the world that likes to fuck us.”

Cat nods and grabs both of my hands in hers, squeezing them gently. Her expression is loving

and it sends a pang of guilt through my body. Cat’s the closest thing to a mother that I remember. My

own skipped town before I’d really formed any solid memories of her. They’re few and far between

and they're painful, so I keep them locked away in the darkest recesses of my mind. But Cat... she's
always been the sunshine on my cloudy days.

She rubs my hands and closes her eyes, murmuring, "I sense that your aura is conflicted, very
blue with hints of red. Do not let anger guide your decisions, my boy. Nor can you let sadness decide
your future. Only you can do that, but do so carefully. I know you will make your choices,
consequences be damned, but know that whichever path you take, there *will* be consequences. Make
sure they're worth it."

She coughs slightly, then jerks her hands from mine. She turns away from me like she didn't just
make things even murkier and goes about her business. I scoot out from the bar and throw a handful
of twenties onto the counter, just as Poppy walks back over. She looks relieved as she giggles softly,
"My eyeballs were practically swimming! Have you *seen* the bathroom in this place? It was
incredible... I've never sat on a couch so plush. And the candles and incense... gah, I could live in a
place like this!"

I chuckle and nod thoughtfully. "Indeed, it would be a reprieve from the bright lights and the
clang-a-langing sounds of the casino. But alas, it seems as if neither of us has much control over *that* aspect of our lives right now."

Poppy nods, then frowns when she sees the money on the counter. "Oh, are we leaving? I was
just starting to really let loose!"
I smirk at her and wiggle my eyebrows. "I noticed, but yes, it's late. I figured your husband is
probably passed out by now if you'd like for me to take you home."

She chews her bottom lip for a moment, then asks, “And if I don’t want to go home?”

One shoulder bounces as I reply, “Well, I guess we could stay here a bit longer, but I’m afraid the fun is going to have to come to an end. That...” I motion to the wad of cash on the counter, “...was all the money I had. Cat loves me, but not *that* much. But I am at your service, ma’am. Tell me where you want to go.”

Poppy doesn’t even think on that for a minute before she blurts out, “What about your place?”

I can feel Cat staring at me over Poppy’s head, but I ignore her, keeping my gaze fixed solely on

Poppy’s face and her innocent expression. I pat her shoulder gently, then shake my head, “Oh honey, I

don’t have a place. I’m never in town long enough to put down any roots. I just breeze through like a

hurricane when the mood suits me, then I’m gone again. I mean, yeah, I crash with my Pops

sometimes, but his place isn’t suitable for a woman.”

I glance up to find Cat still staring at me, but her expression has changed to one that almost

looks... amused. I shake off the uncomfortable feeling that grips me for a moment, then look back at

Poppy. “Not that I don’t have someplace I’m staying, of course, but it’s just a hotel suite. Nothing

fancy. It’s got a bed, a living space, a bathroom, and a kitchenette. It gets me through the limited engagements, but--”

“Take me there,” Poppy interrupts.

I blink at her in surprise and shake my head slowly. “What?”

Poppy nudges me towards the door, a grin on her face. “Take me to your hotel. I can’t go home tonight. Seriously. If I see Brad tonight, I might do something I regret, so save me the embarrassment and let me crash with you... please?”

I swallow down the lump in my throat, but nod, bowing my head curtly to her. “As you wish.”

She nods and stomps off, weaving her way through the half-capacity crowd. I turn to follow her and hear Cat’s voice call after me, “Consequences, Storm... everything has consequences...”

I shake the ominous feeling that settles over as I walk out of the Hookah bar and find Poppy already sitting astride my bike, helmet on her head and my leather jacket in her hand. She turns to look at me through the opened visor and waves the jacket around in the air. “Figured you might want this..”

Walking over to the bike, I take the jacket from her and shrug it on, closing my eyes with a sigh as the worn leather molds to my body. I tilt my head from side to side and relish in the feeling of a hug from an old friend. I open my eyes and see her watching me unabashedly. I turn and throw my leg over the seat, being careful not to kick her and settle into the seat. She instantly wraps her arms around my waist and despite my better judgement, I can feel a jolt of energy sizzle through me at her touch and it’s definitely *not* coming from the engine.

She keeps the side of her head pressed between my shoulder blades for the entire ride, her hands

balled up in the thin fabric of my tank top. By the time we get to my hotel, my thoughts are swirling in and out of negativity. I park the bike and kill the engine, then glance over my shoulder at her as I pull my helmet off. “It isn’t much, but you’re welcome to stay. If you change your mind, I’ll be happy to
call a cab for you.”

I sit there silently and wait for her to let go of me, but she doesn’t. Her hands are still balled
firmly in my shirt, so I try again. “Did you want me to... call one now?”

She shakes her head at me, then sighs softly. “No, it’s just so... peaceful here. I didn’t know
there was any corner of Atlantic City that wasn’t polluted by the hustle and bustle of tourists.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “That’s because we’re not *in* Atlantic City anymore. We’re in Egg
Harbor. I always stay out here when I come to AC. It’s just far enough away from the city lights that I
don’t feel all the pressure of my fights weighing on me, but close enough that I can be there in under
half an hour.”

She nods slowly, then releases my shirt and climbs off the bike from behind me. She brushes
herself off, then stands there awkwardly as I dismount the bike and stash the helmets back in the
saddlebags. I nudge her gently with my shoulder. “You okay? Like I said, I can call a cab... or take
you back..”

She snaps her gaze up to mine, shaking her head quickly. “No, no... please. This is fine. It’ll be
good to get out of the city for a while. I wasn’t raised a city girl, so I still feel out of place there.”

I smile and open my arms wide. “Ocean City boy myself, though my Pops moved us up into AC when I was teenager. That’s when I starting honing my craft...”

She narrows her eyes at me as I dig into my back pocket to make sure the hotel room key is still there. She smirks and laughs softly, “You mean beating the crap out of the kids who tried to take your lunch money?”

A darkness slides through my emotions, but I quickly will it away. The reason I fought had far

less to do with money and more to do with my very survival. It was a dog eat dog world for a mixed

kid in the inner city, but I don’t need to bombard her with my pity party.. I just shrug a shoulder and

motion towards the hotel. “I assure you, they weren’t after lunch money, but yeah, something like that.

Pops did the best he could with me. There’s certainly none of my negative traits that I can blame him for...”

I slide the key card into the lock on the outside door and the light flashes green. I pull the door

open and motion her inside. She obliges and I lead the way to my first floor suite. It’s a hangup I have about hotels. I don’t do elevators, so I always request the first floor. That, and I have a fear of fires dating back to the night our entire block went up in flames in Ocean City. It’s the whole reason we

moved to Atlantic City and though it was deemed to be due to faulty electrical wiring in our apartment

building, I’ve had the hangup ever since.

I push open the door to my suite and flip on the light, stepping aside so Poppy can enter the room.

She glances around, then turns around and looks at me curiously.
“There’s only one bed?”

Despite my macho exterior, a blush creeps across my cheeks. Of course there's only one bed.

There’s only one me. “There’s a pullout in the couch,” I murmur as I motion to the burgundy atrocity.

“I can sleep there and you can take the bed.”

Poppy nods thoughtfully and wanders into the bedroom. She disappears into the bathroom and I

hear the water running, so I assume she’s taking a shower. I use the time to slip into the bedroom and

grab a pair of sleep shorts, quickly changing out of my street clothes and tossing them onto the chair in the corner of the small bedroom. I’m just finishing up when I hear the bathroom door creak open.

Poppy lets out a high-pitched squeal as my presence in the rooms startles her. She stumbles over

her words as she tries to say something, “I, uh... didn’t, uh, I can just, uh...”

Despite my better judgement, I feel the nervous chuckle bubble up in my throat before I can stop

it. She looks absolutely mortified, but everything of importance is covered. Nothing is inappropriate,

even though I *am* only wearing a thin pair of shorts. She’s noticed too as her eyes drift from my face down to my upper body that is utterly exposed. It’s nothing less than what I fight in, except I’m

usually wearing underwear under my shorts when I fight. But I’m going to go out on a limb here and say she’s never seen me fight.

“My face is up here, you know,” I tease.

She jerks her eyes up my body to my face, crimson tingeing her cheeks as she stammers, “Sorry, I

uh... I'm an idiot, ogling you like a piece of meat..."

I shrug and dig into the top drawer, producing a t-shirt that I toss at her
"Make yourself
comfortable, Poppy. And don't worry about staring at me. I know I'm
an ugly, imposing dude that
makes people nervous. I can't say I blame you for wanting to keep an
eye on me."

She mumbles under her breath as she turns her back to me and pulls
the dress off over her head,
letting it fall to the floor. I grunt softly, feeling the uncomfortable
tightness in my groin as my eyes rake over her skin. There's a basic beige
bra strap that cuts across her back and she's wearing some
kind of skin-tight shorts that accentuate the gentle slope of her hips
She's not all purchased curves
and angles like the women I'm used to seeing, but there's something
about the simplicity of her body
that sets mine on edge. She wiggles into my t-shirt quickly, the length
hitting against her upper thigh.
Most girls who've worn my shirts are tiny and swallowed alive in my
clothing. Despite her lithe
frame though, her height makes my shirt almost indecent on her. My
eyes are slowly taking in the
subtle outline of her shape when she turns around to find me staring.

Before I can even blink, she's closed the distance between us,
murmuring, "Looks like I'm not the
only one with wandering-eyes syndrome."

I snap out of my haze quickly, nodding as I hastily back away from
her. "I'm just, uh, gonna go in
there and, you know... chill on the couch or whatever." I back out of
the door as fast as I can, nearly
tripping backwards over my feet as I hasten my exit from the room. I
don't know what it is about this

woman, but something tells me I'm about to go dive head first down a rabbit hole from which there's no return...



NINE

Poppy

When Storm stumbles backwards out of the room, the haze holding my thoughts hostage clears

and I dive for the bed, mortified. Did I just make eyes at Braxton Storm? What the hell is wrong with

me? I have a loving, faithful husband at home who's waiting... oh, who am I kidding? Brad is none of

that. He hasn't been loving since before the ink dried on our marriage license. He's certainly not

faithful and I doubt he's waiting up for me. After all, *he's* the one who told me not to bother coming home. Besides, it's not like I was doing anything other than window shopping. Just appreciating the

human form in one spectacular display of taut muscle and sharp angles.

Braxton Storm is everything Brad isn't. He's charming and witty. He's known me for a few

hours, and he already knows more about what I like than Brad has bothered to figure out in six years.

And he's a gentleman. A gorgeous gentleman who gives new meaning to tall, dark, and handsome. So

far, Braxton Storm ticks every box on my checklist except one - he's not my husband. He's not my boyfriend. He's barely even a friend.

I flop on the bed, trying to get comfortable as I flip through something like two thousand channels.

Who needs two thousand channels of television? What's even worse is there's nothing on any of

them! I groan and turn onto my side, slamming my eyes shut and trying to will myself into sleep. After

what seems like an eternity, I scoot out of the bed and wander to the doorway, swinging it open and

stepping into the living area... except I'm met by a massive wall that doesn't budge as I slam into it.

"Oof, sorry..."

I crane my head back to see Storm standing there, looking tousled like he's already been asleep.

He points into the room at the bathroom and smiles sleepily, "All that tea got to me too, it just took a little longer."

I step out of his way and he trudges through the room, stepping into the bathroom and pushing the

door almost closed. I stand there, stupefied as I listen to him pee. What the hell? I'm such a creeper!

The man has been nothing but nice to me and here I am, eavesdropping on his bodily functions. I

shake my head and slip out of the room before he can realize that I've been listening in on his toilet concerto.

I walk into the living room area and drop down onto the couch, pulling my legs underneath me.

After several minutes, he wanders back out and looks at me with an amused look on his face. “Is the bed too hard? Do you need extra pillows? I can call down and—”

I put both hands up in the air and shake my head. “No, no... the bed’s fine... it’s just... big, and empty... and lonely...”

Fuck Poppy, get it together. You sound absolutely pathetic right now. Storm nods and walks over to the couch, sitting down beside me. “Well, how about we be lonely together?”

My stomach lurches, doing somersaults as he plops his massive frame beside me. This is wrong on absolutely every level, but why does it feel so comfortable? So normal? So *right*?

Storm flips on the TV and starts channel surfing as I sit in the far corner of the couch, tucked into the smallest ball one could make out of a human body. Except my long, gangly legs. They stick out from under the ball making me look like Qbert, minus the honking schnozz. He settles on a new program that’s recapping his fight.

Seeing him on the screen in a tiny pair of shorts, even shorter than the ones he’s wearing now, piques my interest. I watch him dance across the screen, weaving in and out of his opponent’s punches like a graceful dancer, every move calculated, every move protected... until out of nowhere, his opponent’s foot crashes into the side of his head and Storm goes face down to the mat like a sack of rocks... and he doesn’t get back up.

I gasp and turn my attention away from the TV to him, where he's scowling at the footage. He

shakes his head like he's trying to wipe away the memory of it, so I nudge his shoulder. "That was a

dirty move, Storm. You couldn't have possibly known—"

He cuts me off with a low growl, "I know. It's *my* move. And that bastard stole it. It's called the white rabbit and it's very effective because it almost breaks the rules of time. It comes at you a lot

faster than you think...by the time you realize what's happening, it's too late. And the thief stole it!"

I shrink down beside him and he sighs. "I'm sorry Poppy, I shouldn't have yelled at you. But it's

frustrating when everything you've spent your whole life working for... is at risk because of one

error. And knowing that one more mistake could be the end of it all... years of hard work and

dedication to perfect a craft, just to have it thrown down the drain by someone else..."

My entire body tenses as he rests his arm across the back of the couch. I nod slowly and blow

out a breath, my hair flopping around in front of my face. "I know, Storm. You're not only one whose

dream is five seconds from being completely shattered, but I've got three barely-healed cracks in my

clavicle that say my dream is a lot closer to being done than yours."

He turns to look at me sharply. "I swear when I see that husband of yours—

I cut him off, shaking my head. "It wasn't Brad, actually. It was a horse. A wild one, black as

night and just as dangerous. Threw me off while I was trying to break her... and the bones just

snapped. One, two, three... happened last fall, but I'm really just starting to get my mobility back."

He shudders and winces, scrunching up his face into an expression that mimics pain. "Sounds like it hurt."

I nod, "Yeah, it did, but not as bad as Brad telling me I wasn't allowed to go back to the ranch.

He ended my career before it ever really got started. Well, I mean... the ranch wasn't my end game,

but it was my means to get there. And he just slammed it all in a safe deposit box and threw away the

key. He claims he's keeping me safe, but he's really just keeping me close, caged up so nobody else can get to me."

Storm shifts on the couch beside me and I slide against him in the depression created by his body.

My heart flutters slightly as my leg touches his and I snatch my gaze up to his face in surprise. He

reaches down to me and brushes his hand along the side of my face, tucking stray hairs behind my ear

before resting his palm against my cheek.

"Nobody should ever cage another human. Not in chains and not in shackles. And certainly not in

loveless, hopeless captivity where a bird forgets how to fly."

I turn my face into his hand as he speaks, the word resonating somewhere deep inside of me...

down below my thudding heart, down below my flip-flopping stomach, he touches something all the

way down in my soul and in that moment, I feel something inside of me break. When I look back up at

him, there are tears rolling down my cheeks.

Storm shakes his head as he brushes them away with his thumb.
“Don’t cry, Poppy. You are so
much stronger than you give yourself credit for... don’t cry for him.”

He leans down and kisses my cheek gently, his lips capturing a tear as he does. Embarrassed, I
turn my head, my lips brushing against his as I do. And in that moment, my resolve shatters as a jolt of
electricity flashes through my body, all the way to my very core. I gasp sharply, but there’s some kind
of magnetic force keeping me there, my mouth linked to his as I struggle to inhale.

What seems like an eternity passes before Storm pulls back suddenly, his voice apologetic as he
stumbles to find words, “Shit, Poppy, I’m sorry... I don’t know what I was thinking, please forgive—

But that’s all he manages to say before I crush my lips back to his, pouring every emotion I’ve
experienced on this rollercoaster over the last twenty-four hours into a kiss that neither of us was
prepared to defend against. He pushes the hand from my cheek back into my hair, angling his head so
that our mouths fit together like the final pieces of a puzzle as I mumble, “Just don’t think, Storm. I’m tired of thinking. I’m tired of running scared. I’m tired of doing everything by the book. Of being little miss prim and proper. For once, I want to just go mad and do something for me.”

Storm groans against my mouth and I take the opportunity to slide my tongue past his lips and
tangle it with his own. His hands slide down to my waist and tug me onto his lap as our tongues tango
in his mouth. Everything about this is so wrong, but for fuck’s sake, why does it feel so right?

I jerk back from him, gasping for breath and scramble off his lap, standing up and stumbling back
as my hand flies to my lips, my fingertips caressing the swollen skin there.

Storm winces and starts with another apology, “Fucking hell, I’m sorry...again...”

I groan and shake my head as I stare down at him. “Don’t fucking apologize, Storm. Karma’s an
evil bitch and I’m sure she’ll find me someday, but today isn’t that day. I’m done following the rules,
just to get shit on. Time after time, day after day, I’m reminded that I can’t go back to yesterday
anyway, so why bother?”

Storm’s eyes flash as I rip the shirt off over my head, dropping it onto the floor behind me. He
trails his tongue slowly along his bottom lip as he eyes my naked breasts on full display inches in
front of his face. I took my bra off after I went to bed, because it was poking me in the side. Damn
traitorous underwire!

He grunts and shifts himself on the couch. It’s obvious that he’s being affected by this heady
feeling, just like me. I reach my hands for the shorties I’ve always worn under my uniform and Storm
reaches his hands out, grabbing hold of my hands and flattening them against my hips.

I whimper slightly as he scoots to the front of the couch, his gaze wandering up to mine. I’m
certain he’s about to shut down this madness, when he murmurs, “Let me...”

My eyes widen as he hooks his thumbs into the waistband of my shorties and keeping my hands

between his and my body, tugs them down to my knees, where they slip free and puddle at my ankles.

Storm inhales sharply, a high-pitched whistle sound coming from his lips as his eyes rove over every inch of my naked body.

“Fucking hell, Poppy. You’re gorgeous...”

I know I’m blushing, but I don’t even care at this point. I glance down at his shorts quickly, then

back up to his face, hoping my sneak-peek was imperceptible, but I know that he caught me looking.

A smirk twists his lips and he grabs hold of his shorts, lifting his ass off the couch and shimmying

them off to reveal a dick that’s veined on every surface, thick, and completely erect. So I’m *not* the only one completely aroused.

Storm kicks his shorts off and I stare in surprise at his cock bobbing in front of me. Storm

reaches up and grabs my hips, gently pulling me forward until I have to spread my legs so that I’m

straddling his thighs. He looks up at my face and locks his gaze to mine as he slides a hand between

my legs, his touch gentle and slow as he slides one finger along my slit several times. He lets his

thumb graze my clit gently before he plunges that finger inside me.

Everything in my body tenses up at the intrusion, but instead of yanking away like I should be

doing, I’m drawn in deeper to him. Storm groans as his finger penetrates my wetness and he pumps it

gently as he rubs his thumb over my clit in small circles, sending pangs of need to my core. I know I

shouldn’t be doing this, but if it’s wrong, I don’t want to be right.

“That’s it... mmm, oh God, relax for me Poppy. Just relax and let it happen.”

He leans forward and captures one of my nipples in his mouth, his warm tongue swirling around
the tiny bud that springs to life with his touch. I look down and seeing this near-strange man sucking
on my breast releases something feral inside of me. I bury my hand into his hair, wrapping the curly
strands around my fingers as I hold him there. He nibbles against the sensitive flesh as he adds a
second finger to my pussy, spreading them apart as he pushes them inside of me.

I can already feel tension building in my core and the want... no, the need to have this man inside
me is already hovering near unbearable. I reach down between my legs and grab his wrist, tugging at
his hand. He unlatches from my breast and glances up at me in confusion as I tug on his hand again.
He pulls his fingers out of my body and murmurs, “Does that not feel good for you?”

I nod, my breathing already staccatoed. “It does, but it’s not what I want. I want you inside me...
not your fingers, but you... please, Storm...”

Storm groans as he brings his hands to my hips and guides me over his erection, the crown of his
cock pressing against my entrance. His breathing is labored too as he asks, “Are you sure you want
this?”

I inhale a deep breath and nod, making eye contact with him before assaulting his lips with my
own. As his tongue slips into my mouth, he pulls me down onto him and his dick slides home,

stretching me with a painful sensation of pleasure that ricochets through my body as he continues to
push me down, further and further, onto his dick until he's bottomed out inside of me and my cunt feels
so full that I might explode.

I cry out softly and Storm freezes, digging his fingertips into the fleshy part of my hips. I pull
back from him and lean my head back as I attempt to lift up off of his lap. He lets me, but pulls me
right back down onto his cock. I keen every time he begins to pull out. Storm growls softly as I bob
up and down his length, his hands firmly locked onto my hips and his mouth alternating between my
breasts as I ride him.

It doesn't take long before the muscles in my pussy are tightening around him and he's moaning in
short bursts. He lets go of my hips and I continue to rock against him, rubbing my clit along his length every time his cock slides home. I bring my hands to the sides of his face and grip tightly as I kiss
him, pouring every emotion that's running wild inside me into the kiss.

He yanks his hands up to the back of my head, twisting his fingers up in the length. He plunges
his tongue into my mouth as my pussy clenches tightly around his dick that's buried inside of me. I'm
caught by surprise by the sensation of my release of pleasure because it's not something I'm used to
feeling during sex. I've masturbated my way to this feeling before, but never with a man balls-deep
inside me.

It continues for several minutes, his body still underneath me, until he stops moving entirely and
leans his head back away from me, his eyes closed tightly. His mouth is twisted in a silent scream

and as I stop moving, I can feel his dick twitching inside me while he makes little grunting noises.

There's no doubt in my mind that Storm is filling me with his seed as our bodies are rocked with
white-hot pleasure.

After what feels like an eternity of blinding ecstasy, we both come to a complete standstill. I take

in the sweaty face of Storm and realization crashes over me like a rogue wave. Oh, my God... what

have I done? As I bring my hands to rest against the broad chest before me, I realize how small my

hand is compared to the enormous muscles that ripple underneath my touch. Nothing about this man is

anything like my husband, like the man I'm sworn to love and honor, no matter what. I let out a

startled cry and scramble off his lap, whimpering when his length slides out of me.

I snatch up my shorties and his shirt and yank them back on without a word, standing before him

in utter shock as the ramifications of what I just did slam into my conscience. He hasn't moved a

muscle and is still perched on the couch, his dick bobbing slightly as a dribble of something viscous

and the color of fresh pearls slides down the side of him. His entire length glistens in the dim lighting and Storm makes no effort to cover himself.

It takes several minutes for my voice to work as I start to apologize, "Oh, my God... I'm so

sorry... I can't believe I made you—"

Storm shakes his head and stands, looking down at me with the most gentle, unassuming look I've

ever seen on his face. "Nobody made anybody do anything here, Poppy. It just happened... and I'm

not going to lie and say I regret it, either, because I don't. If that makes me a bad man, then so be it. I don't mind being the bad guy if it means you spend one less night with that villain you call a husband."

I gasp, a startled cry tumbling out of my mouth. Storm shakes his head and jerks his shorts up,

then steps over to me and wraps his arms tightly around me. So tightly, that I can't move but it doesn't make me feel claustrophobic. Instead, it makes me feel safe, needed, *wanted*... He lifts me up into his arms and walks me into the bedroom, laying me down on the bed. He tucks the covers up over me as

I stare mindlessly in front of me, then turns to walk out of the room.

"Wait," I call. Storm stops in the doorway, his long arms bracing himself against the door frame

as he glances over his shoulder to look back at me. I shudder as I take in the wildness of the second

man in my life that I've been with and sigh. Patting the bed beside me, I implore, "Stay with me."

Storm sighs and turns around completely to face me, his shorts hanging low enough on his hips

that the sharp lines of muscle that zig-zag across his stomach are clearly visible, right down to the

deep cut of a 'V' shape just above his waistband. I lick my lips slowly, then trail my eyes up to his face. "Please..."

Shaking his head, Storm replies, "I don't want to complicate matters for you, Poppy."

I frown, sitting up in the bed with a sigh. "Things are already complicated, Storm. Stay with me

tonight, so that it won't be worthless, so it will have meant something. At least give me that. Give me

a meaning to this... something to make facing the consequences worth it...”

His entire body tenses at my final plea and he nods slowly. Wordlessly, he walks over to the bed and climbs in beside me. He glances down at me as I turn into him and I feel the tension in every fiber of his being. Slowly, he starts to relax, looping an arm across my back that gradually slides down my body until his hand rests against my ass. I can’t say I mind, though, as I rest my cheek against his chest and let my worries fade away to the beat of his steadily thumping heartbeat.

I don’t know if I’m ashamed or mad at myself, relieved with myself, or ready to give myself a really fucking big pat on the back The only thing I know right now is that I just fucked Braxton Storm... and I liked it...



TEN

Storm

Waking up in the crispness of the white sheets on the king-sized hotel room bed automatically

makes my head hurt. It's so bright in here that doing anything other than squinting my eyes makes the

light sensitivity rear its ugly head. It's a nasty side-effect of being clobbered in the head one too many times. Joe says it isn't even remotely normal, but it *is* common and a lot of migraine sufferers deal with light sensitivities. The neon and fluorescent lights of the night-life don't seem to bother me like the blinding early morning rays of the sun... especially when it's bouncing all over the room and

reflecting off sheets that are whiter than a dentist's smile.

I sit up and stretch my arms over my head, the sheet slipping down to my waist, where it puddles

around my hips. I grunt and kick the sheet the rest of the way off of me, watching as it slides off the

bed to the floor. I glance to my side quickly and frown when I find that all that remains of the woman

who turned my world upside-down last night is a slight indentation in the mattress and my crumpled

up t shirt. I snatch the shirt off the bed and bring it to my nose, inhaling. The bed and shirt are both cold, indicating that they've both been empty for a while, but a soft hint of something floral infiltrates my nostrils and I know instantly that last night wasn't a dream.

Jumping out of the bed, I stomp through the suite, looking for any other sign of her, but find none.

The casino uniform she was wearing is gone, along with every other trace that she was ever here. I

shudder when I think of the disappointment that would be written all over my father's face if he could

see me right now, pining after a woman I barely know. I told myself I was done with one-night

stands and Cat tried to warn me last night. She's right, I'm out of control and in a tailspin from which

I don't know if I can even recover. Plus, top things off, I lost my fight last night. Guess it's a good

thing I bet on the other guy. My career's one fuck-up from being in the toilet.

I wince when my cell phone rings from my joggers that I left on the floor last night. Trudging
over, I snatch up the pants and dig out the dinosaur flip phone. No sense in having bells and whistles
when the only thing I use it for is to keep in contact with my manager, my trainer, and my father. And
Cat occasionally, but she never calls me. It's not her style. She'll send me a text occasionally, but
we're a talk-in-person kind of relationship. I glance down at the tiny screen on the front that's
flashing, 'Joe.'

I flip the phone open and hold it to my ear, "Talk to me."

Joe's voice crackles through the phone, "Storm, you promised you'd get that head of your
checked out this morning if I let you leave last night. It's now ten am, you haven't been checked out,
and my guess is I woke you up. Where the fuck did you go last night? Are you drinking again? You
know alcohol and those experimental pills don't mix well..."

I groan and flop down on the bed, wincing as it groans under my weight. "Where I went and with
whom is none of your business, but I can assure you I wasn't drinking. Unless you're counting tea,
then I drank a whole fucking lot last night. Enough that I had a good three minute piss once it worked
its way through my system. Let me shower and get dressed and I will meet you anywhere you damn
well want, as long as you bring me food. Deal?"

Joe groans, "Ugh, deal. You better be glad I care about you kid, because you can sure be a royal

pain in the ass. Wait, with whom? Do I need to call the PR firm to get in front of a scandal or were you at least smart about that?”

“Relax, Joe... Pete handles that kind of shit anyway. No need to call in an emergency favor, unless you can get your hands on some dim sum this time of day, then call away because I’ve got a hankerin’ for some worse than a druggie needs a fix. Otherwise, name your place and I’ll be there at noon, but I’m coming on the bike. I’m not messing with a cabbie...”

Joe’s voice is strained as he asks, “Are you in the Egg again or did you crash in Atlantic last night?”

“The Egg, man... you know I won’t stay in AC unless I gotta.”

Joe is silent for several moments, during which I can hear him on the other line. His voice is muffled, but he still sounds incredibly annoyed. Finally, his voice crackles back over my line, “6529 East Black Horse Pike, at the corner of Spruce. You better be there, Storm. I’m not playing games with you over this. You’re not fighting again until you’re cleared.”

I grunt, “Fine. Dim sum or I walk.” I snap the phone closed before Joe has a chance to get a word in edgewise and I glance over at the clock. Fuck. It’s actually well past ten and I’m barely functioning. I stand up and growl, yanking my shorts off and storming into the bathroom. I turn the water on as hot as it will go and slip in, letting the water pelt my body until it starts to turn cold. I quickly scrub some shampoo through my hair and over my body, then rinse and step out onto the bath mat. I grunt at my reflection as I turn my face to the side and see that I have a lovely welt blooming

from my cheek up into my hairline. Fucker kicked me hard, shit.

I lean over the sink and examine the discoloration that's an angry purple that's fairly noticeable
against my complexion. I might look sun-kissed year-round, but I don't have my dad's rich coffee
tone, not unless you dilute it with a good bit of milk. Ha, a good bit of milk. That's about all my
mother gave me besides an inferiority complex about a woman never being able to love me. I mean,
damn, my own mother didn't love me enough to stay, so why should any other woman?

Slamming my hand down on the sink, I wince when something sharp pokes my palm. I snatch my
hand back and find a small clip resting there, glaring up at me like evidence of my evil deeds. I pick
it up and examine it and even though I know it belongs to Poppy, a woman I can never have... again,
anyway... I can't help but admire the intricate details of the delicately carved wooden horse that
adorns the otherwise mundane clip.

I close my hand around it and muddle through the rest of my routine, dropping the clip into the
pair of jeans I begrudgingly put on. I'm a low-key kind of guy, but when I visit the doctor, I have to
give them the impression that I at least somewhat care about what they have to say. Not that it will
stop me. They and I both know this, but it's a formality to appease Joe. I pat the tiny bulge in my
pocket as I transfer my wallet from my joggers to my jeans and sigh. There's no time like the present
to have your world shattered by bad news.

When I pull into the parking lot of the modern, two-story building, a feeling of dread clenches my

gut. I know that they're not going to scan my head and pretend to find something there that really isn't, but sometimes not knowing is a lot less stressful. If I'm going to stroke-out tomorrow from an aneurysm in my brain, I don't want to know about it today. That will just ruin today, too and since tomorrow'd be shit too, it'd be a pretty fucked up way to go.

Doctor's offices make me nervous. They have since I was kid, long before I became a street fighter even, though that gig landed me in the emergency room more than once. I've got quite a few scars that make for excellent parlor room conversation and I've had more stitches and concussions than I care to count. The latter is why Joe's so concerned. He's says there's only so many times you can slam a brain around inside your skull before it starts to become mush.

I know he's genuinely worried about me and that he truly has my best interest in mind. I wouldn't trust him like I do if I thought he was quacky. He's never led me wrong so far, but I have a feeling the two of us are going to butt heads on this. Because he's going to want me to walk away from fighting and I'm probably going to tell him that I will quit fighting the day he sucks my dick.

Because I'm an asshole by nature and that's what assholes do. They do what they want to do, consequences be damned. Yeah, Cat knows me better than I fucking know myself. Making me feel guilty and all that jazz when it comes to my lousy decision-making skills. I never said I was good at making critical life-choices. I actually suck at it and that's why I've hired the two bumbling idiots sitting in the waiting room chairs in three-piece suits looking at me like a I'm a dead man walking.

“Joe, Pete, yo... sun’s shining, so be happy...”

Peter glances at Joe and sighs, then nods in my direction. Joe holds up a greasy paper bag and
my eyes light up. “Shit, you found some! I hope it tastes as good as I’ve been imagining all the way
here, because I’m starving...”

I pull out the nondescript carton and flick open the flaps, groaning as the sweet and savory scent
of the steamed buns assaults my sense. “Yes sir... just what the doctor ordered.” I smirk and grab the
chopsticks that Joe holds out to me and load two of the buns into my mouth, chewing greedily. When
I’ve got them about halfway chewed, I point at Joe with the chopsticks. “K, man... you made good on
your end of the bargain, so I will make good on mine. Radiate me or whatever they’re gonna do to my
head.”

Peter’s the one who speaks and I gnash my teeth into the sticky dough of one of the buns, my eyes
rolling back in my head as the filling squirts out onto my tongue. I chew like I haven’t eaten in days,
greedily swallowing down the meal that will cost me at least a C note. “Storm, we had your medical
records sent over. This doctor is really concerned.”

I nod as I wave the chopsticks around, “Yeah, I know... CTE and something about my brain
exploding.”

Peter shakes his head and looks at Joe. “You said you explained this to him.”

Joe grunts and clear his throat. “I did. More than once, as did the paramedics last night when they checked him over. He knows that if he takes one more concussing hit to the head that it might cause dire injuries that he may not recover from. He just doesn’t care, Peter.”

I clear my own throat and lean forward in the chair where I’ve plopped my ass. “I care, Joe. But what you’re asking me to do is to walk away from who I am.” I pop another bun into my mouth and chew, then talk around it as I wave the chopsticks around in the air for effects. “I’m not a quitter. Never have been, never will be. I will get what I want, one way or another and nobody is going to stop me, including myself. I will fight in that ring until they have to drag me off on a stretcher...”

I glare at Peter as he raises one finger and point the chopsticks directly at him, “...and even then, I will be back out there on fight night, ready to go.”

Joe sighs as the nurse walks out, looking at me pigging out like I’m something a wayward dog dragged in off the street. “Storm, can we just get through this damn test before you start spouting off your wills and won’ts? Let’s get a look at the damage you’ve already done and then we will discuss the steps to keep a career-ending injury from happening.”

Peter whirls around to look at Joe with his mouth open, “That’s not what we agreed to, Joe. We agreed this was it... we *all* know what that damn test is going to show. It’s not going to show a little bruising here, and a bit of swelling there. We already discussed the probable outcome of this test and what we would recommend to Storm. Now you’re backtracking?”

Joe shakes his head with a sigh as the nurse's eyes widen, focusing on me like she's pitying me. I

have a suspicion that I'm not going to like the answer I get, but I ask anyway, "And what were you going to recommend?"

Peter sighs heavily and looks at me, "Look son, I know you love to fight. I know it's

programmed into your DNA, but you have to understand your condition."

Joe mumbles, but everyone still hears it, "Probable condition."

Peter growls at Joe, giving him a look that clearly says, 'Shut up.' He turns back to me and rests

a hand on my knee. "You know I'm always looking out for your best interest, kid. Hell, *I* booked this round of fights for you, but if this CT scan shows what we're expecting it to show, you're gonna have to cancel them."

I shift uncomfortably in my seat as I pop the final dumpling on my mouth. "Whish wuns?" I

mutter around the food that suddenly isn't tasting as good as it did five minutes ago.

Peter sighs, "All of them, Storm. All of them. If this CT comes back showing that you're already

well into the later stages of CTE, then we can't risk another fight. I know you don't want to hear this, but this would be a dire outcome. The worst of the worst, but it's necessary. We suspect you're at

least at stage two of the disease. There's no doubt that you have it, but the severity is what's going to matter. If you're beyond stage two, that's it for the fighting."

I grunt and cross my eyes, "I'll be damned if you're the one making that decision, Peter. It's *my*

brain and *my* life."

Joe sighs heavily and I know something is weighing on his mind, so I point at him, “Just say it, man. Don’t beat around the bush. What the hell is so bad that y’all are so damn worried? So I’ll have some memory loss and I’ll be a totally forgetful asshole when I’m an old man.”

Joe shakes his head slowly, “Storm, if you’re beyond stage two... and you take another hit like you did last night, the decisions Peter will be making won’t have anything to do with your career or your future... he’ll be making decisions about your funeral...”



ELEVEN

Poppy

Everything in me protested this morning when I slipped out of Storm’s bed and snuck out of his hotel room without waking him. But it was better that way because if I had to say goodbye to him, things would have been messy. My life is complicated enough. Despite the mind-shattering sex we

had last night, I cannot allow myself to get attached to anyone. Brad would never accept me even

being friends with a guy, especially not one that I have chemistry with and there's no denying the

chemistry between Storm and I. No, this was the only way to do it... crawl out of bed like a cheap

whore and do the walk of shame, hail a cab, and slip in the house before Brad wakes up.

I sigh as I rest my forehead against the cool shower wall. The hot water's been gone for several

minutes now, but I just can't bring myself to get out of the shower. I've scrubbed my body damn near

raw to remove Storm's scent from me, but he's still the only thing I can smell. It's like his essence has permeated every part of me and I can't shake him. Which is completely ridiculous, I know. This is

just my guilty conscience eating me alive from the inside. Let it devour me, but there's no way in hell

I'm telling Brad what I did. He probably wouldn't even care.

Reaching for my shampoo, I finally manage to wash my hair in the chilly water, tracking my

hands down out of my locks and over my body where Storm touched me last night. If I close my eyes

tight enough, I can almost feel his hands still on me as I skate my own over my breasts, my nipples

perking up under my intimate touch. I shudder and continue my trek across my body, slipping one hand

between my legs. Following the path of Storm's caresses last night, I find my body instantly

responding.

I whimper softly as I twist in the shower to let the now-ice cold water pelt me, hoping it will

quell this burning desire deep inside me. I haven't craved being touched like this in years, since Brad

and I were horny teenagers sneaking out in his daddy's car to the cliffs
where we'd make out for

hours. Eventually, our makeout spot became our lovemaking spot too,
until we were married. That's

when the love died and I became a possession.

But right now, I'm owned by nobody but me as I plunge my middle
finger inside of myself, biting

down on my bottom lip as I imagine my hand belonging to Storm. It's
completely wrong for me to be

imagining a man that isn't my husband like this, but it's no worse than
the way I let that same man

touch me last night. I pump my finger in and out of myself, stroking
my fingertip along the sensitive

skin inside of my channel as I circle my clit with my thumb, squirming
against my own hand as I tune

out everything else around me, including the pounding on the
bathroom door that's no doubt Brad.

My back is pressed up against the wall as I continue to pleasure
myself, soft moans of approval

cascading down my body with the crystal clear water. My breathing
becomes staggered as I feel

myself nearing the edge. A few more pumps of my finger and I'm
toppling over, the muscles of my

pussy clenching around my finger. It takes me several moments to
compose myself after the pulsing

inside of me stops. I rinse off my hand and finally cut off the water,
relieved that the angry voice on

the other side of the bathroom door has gone silent.

I've been in here forever, so he probably had to go to work, which is
fine by me I have nothing

to say to Brad right now, despite being concerned with getting home
before he woke up and being

worried about what he would think about me actually not coming
home last night. I've got a female

coworker covering for me if for some reason he asks where I was.
We're not super close, but we get

along well enough that I'm confident she'll lie for me and tell him I was with her. It's not like she has any reason to be in his good graces anyway. She doesn't care for him at all.

When I step out of the shower and wrap my towel around my body, I bring my gaze to my

reflection in the mirror. I look like hell chewed me up and spat me back out, despite how well I slept

beside Storm last night. Nothing a little makeup won't fix. I shudder when I think about the

completely inappropriate uniform I'm going to have to slip back into for work tonight. There isn't a

single redeeming quality about it. It's atrociously ugly with its mixed patterns and clashing colors.

The seventies called and they want their clothing back, because there's no way in hell any modern

woman should be wearing that thing.

Still grumbling, I stumble over to the bed and flop down on its made surface, wet towel and all.

I close my eyes, intended to rest them for just a few minutes, but when I open them again, my phone

is screeching at me, my alarm blaring off the walls of the master bedroom. I groan and slide off the

bed, leaving the wet towel spread out over its pristine white surface. Ugh, I've always hated the

white everything in this house. Every room looks like pictures out of a magazine - and that's a

problem for me. A house is for show, a home should look lived-in.

I yank on my clean work uniform and shake my head at my reflection in the mirror. My dusty

brown hair hangs limply around my face because I didn't curl it or tease it up to add volume. My face

has a pallor the color of curdled milk and the hideous brown color of the majority of my potato-sack-disguised-as-too-fucking-short-dress doesn't help matters. I sigh and walk into the bathroom, throwing on a light coat of mascara, a quick dusting of powder, a bit of rouge to liven up my cheeks, and a soft pink lip gloss. I may not look *fancy*, but at least I look human.

Realizing Brad didn't bother to wait for me, I call a cab. It's probably a good thing that I didn't ride with him. He'd have me in close quarters and I've no doubt he'd be lobbing a thousand and one questions at me if he could get me in an enclosed space where I couldn't escape. And he doesn't want to hear what I have to say about what happened last night. Even before the whole debacle happened with Storm, Brad scared me last night. Besides the one time early in our marriage, he's never laid a hand on me and last night, he was definitely going to. If Storm hadn't stepped in, Brad's hand would've skipped straight across my face.

An emptiness fills me as I climb into the cab and murmur the address of the casino where I want to go. The cabbie glances at me through the rearview mirror and there's a sadness in his eyes that I recognize. It's the same look people give you when they know something you don't and even though you deserve to know, it isn't their secret to tell. I flop back in the seat and quietly go over the carefully practiced story I'll feed Brad if he asks where I went last night. I don't even have to lie about most of it, I'll just leave Storm out. Brad doesn't need a reason to get even more possessive of me.

As we pull up to the casino, I lean over the seat and try to hand a twenty that I swiped from my hidden stash of money at the house, but the cabbie refuses to take it. “Ride’s on me, miss...”

I frown slightly, but tuck the crumpled cash back into my apron and open the door, glancing back over at my shoulder at him as he taps his fingers on the steering wheel. He meets my eyes through the rearview mirror again and says, “Curious... how that man brings home one beautiful woman, and then a different beautiful woman leaves without him. Curiouser and curiouser...”

I freeze with my hand on the door as I step out of the vehicle, turning to glance back inside. “What did you say?”

The cabbie shrugs. “If one spends their nights drinking from a bottle labeled ‘Poison’, one shouldn’t be surprised that eventually, it’s going to disagree with them. You’re young and pretty. Don’t let one mistake poison the rest of your life.”

I jump back away from the cab and slam the door, startled by the cabbie’s statement. What mistake is he talking about? Does he know about Storm? Or is he trying to tell me something about Brad? He did seem to imply that Brad brought home someone last night. A sick feeling settles in my belly. Brad came home without me, but he didn’t come home alone.

Panic sweeps over me as I feel arms wrap around my waist. My blood runs cold as Brad’s tinny voice sweeps through my consciousness, “Margot tells me you went out with her last night, but we

both know that's a lie. I don't know where you went or who you went with, but I'm going to find out,

Poppy. You are *mine* and you better make sure you don't ever forget that."

He stands up straight and tugs me back against him, tightening his arms around me so that's it's

uncomfortable and almost hard to breathe. "But aside from that, dear *wife*, it's so lovely to see you this morning. Why don't we sneak off somewhere and..." He leans his face around and licks my

cheek slowly, his tongue brushing over every curve of my face. Then he presses his face into my hair

and inhales deeply, chuckling, "...work out our frustration? We can call it our own little brand of

therapy... couples therapy if you will, where I fuck the living daylights out of you and we move on

from our distrust like it never... even... happened..."

My stomach turns at the prospect of being with Brad. The very thought of being naked underneath

him while he has his way with me without regard for my needs, wants, or feelings is... for the first

time in my life, unacceptable. I shrug out of his arms and push his hands off my hips when they land

there and he tries to pull me back against him. "Stop it, Brad... people are looking and you're making a scene."

His voice drops an octave as he whispers dangerously, "You haven't seen a scene yet, baby. We

don't have to fuck, but don't you dare stand there and act like I disgust you. You know you're just a

plain Jane tomboy with nothing spectacular to offer a man. You should be thankful I'm willing to do

the universe a favor and try to give you a child. You're not getting one any other way..."

Brad lets go of me as several people stop on the sidewalk and start to stare at us. I can hear

hushed whispers all around me, but I can't make out what any of them are saying. Not that I'd want to

know anyway. From the looks of pity and disgust on the faces of the crowd around us, I don't want to

hear what anyone has to say. Right now, I want to melt to the sidewalk and slither to the nearest drain

to hide. Escape. Get away from all the knowing eyes that can see my secrets and lies, no matter how I

try to hide them.

With a huff, Brad storms back inside and I'm left standing on the sidewalk like a dolt. Gradually,

life around me resumes its frenzied pace. Flashes of color whiz by as people hurry on with their daily

lives. Finally, I come to my senses and shake my head slowly, trying to clear the sense of dread that's

clinging to me like super glue. I glance around, trying to find the source of the gloom and doom that's

hanging over my head, but I'm relieved to see that he's nowhere to be found. I guess he found

someone inside to terrorize, instead of coming back out here to further provoke me into a shell of

skittishness.

As I'm scanning the gambling floor for any sign of Brad, my gaze stops dead on a familiar shape

hidden beneath a hoodie, tucked away in the far corner of the slot machines. He must sense me

staring at him in shock, because he lifts his gaze from the floor to mine and it's like everything around me slows to a crawl. Honey-colored eyes meet mine and I can feel an inexplicable force drawing me

deeper into the room.

My feet shuffle one in front of the other in a straight line until the unmistakable scent of musky

vanilla invades my senses. It catches me off guard and lowers my defenses so that when his gruff his
voice murmurs, “Poppy,” it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to throw caution to the wind
and make a decision neither of us can come back from.



TWELVE

Storm

I knew seeing Poppy here was a distinct possibility. After all, this *is* where she works with that pea-brained husband of hers who doesn't appreciate her or what he has. Well, that's not a fair

observation. I've hardly met the guy, but he made enough of an impression on me that I'm gonna have

a permanent bad taste in my mouth where he's concerned. There's no amount of groveling that

bastard can do to redeem himself in my eyes. Not that it matters. Poppy's the one married to him. His

pompous ass stormed through here a couple minutes ago, but I didn't expect it to only take a grand

total of eleven minutes for my and Poppy's paths to cross.

She was gone when I woke up this morning, and if hadn't been for the faint smell of flowers and

her delicate hair clip in my bathroom, I'm pretty sure I'd still think I dreamed it all. She was jumpy
as it was after we accidentally slept together last night and I can't say I blame her. That husband of hers seems like a ticking time bomb that's just waiting to explode. I'm sure finding out that another man's been intimate with his wife is a good way to light a match. I've no intentions of ever telling the asshole and I doubt she does either. She seems smart enough not to poke the bear.

But when she walks into the room, something electric zings through the air and lifts my gaze to the doorway where she is standing, slack-jawed like somebody just told her she's won a million dollars. My entire body tingles when our eyes meet, but I don't dare move. I know better than to make a scene here. I'm already vilified for losing last night. A lot of people lost a lot of money betting on me to win. It wasn't like I threw that match, but it doesn't matter. People get pissy when they lose money. And I'm not looking to make any more enemies than I've already got.

Still, though, when Poppy makes eye contact with me, the dread, worry, and fear cocktail that's been swirling around my gut since the doctor's appointment this morning settles. I inhale sharply and the tinge of cigarette smoke in the air burns my lungs as they inflate. I don't dare move a muscle as Poppy walks across the floor toward me like she's enchanted and unable to stop.

Her feet stop moving when she's inches in front of me and the concern in her voice is palpable,
"Storm. Why...what are you doing here? I thought you didn't fight again until Friday?"

I nod slowly, acknowledging that she is indeed correct. Well, maybe. I may never fight again, but
she's got enough problems to worry about. I don't need to dump mine on her too. And to be fair, *I'm*
one of her problems. One she's admirably facing head-on. I shrug and sigh, "Maybe, maybe not, but I
couldn't stay in that hotel room today knowing...well... what happened there..."

Her cheeks blush furiously as she gasps and brings her hand to her mouth. It's like I've just
translated the Dead Sea scrolls and she's shocked about their contents. She glances around quickly,
undoubtedly checking to see if that jerk is nearby, then turns back to me. "Don't speak of it, not here.
God, don't talk about it here..."

I chuckle and my big mouth fires before I can think to censor myself, "Why? You worried you'll
want it to happen again?"

Her eyes widen to saucers as she stares at me incredulously, then drops the biggest truth bomb
that's ever been dropped on me - or more like exploded right in my face. She nods quickly and
stammers, "Yeah, but it can't... it absolutely can't..."

I truthfully didn't expect to hear that, but nobody is near us, so I press on, "Why not? The
intricacies and ethics of it all didn't matter to you yesterday."

She gulps and twists the toe of her sensible shoe on the threadbare carpet that matches her
hideously gaudy uniform. "Because I'm not the same person I was yesterday. I was weak
yesterday..."

I nod, folding my hands in my lap as I sit back, resuming my perch in the corner, “And you have suddenly found your strength today?”

Something flashes across her eyes and it looks like she’s about to rip me a new asshole, but it’s gone before she can even open her mouth. She sighs and shakes her head, her hair swinging wildly back and forth before settling on her shoulders again. She steps in between my knees and leans over me, her perfume walloping me about as hard as The Rocket did last night. It lights up every nerve in my body as the floral scent energizes everything inside me. She rests her hands on my knees momentarily, then whispers so quietly that I almost can’t hear her over the ambient noise in the casino, “If I’d found my strength, I wouldn’t have gone home at all last night. I would have woken up next to you.”

My jaw drops open at her admission, but she’s backed out of my personal space before I can even respond. She whips out a small note pad that’s tucked into the front of her apron and asks loudly, “So, a club soda with crushed ice? Will that be all, sir?”

I sit there, staring at her like a dumb fuck and all I can manage to do is nod as my brain short-circuits with her response. She turns on her heels and disappears. I may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but even I can call a spade a spade. There’s no doubt in my mind that she jerked away from me suddenly because that evolutionary mishap is watching. The penny slots where I’ve camped out aren’t too far from the blackjack tables and she did mention that when he isn’t hustling the masses from the cage, he’s a dealer.

She returns quicker than I expected with what might be the smallest glass of club soda I've ever seen, filled to the brim with crushed ice. She hands it off to me and I raise one eyebrow, then dig my wallet out of my jeans and fork over a twenty. She laughs a soft, tinkling laugh and stuffs it into her apron. I nod my head at the glass and muse, "All out of the big ones that are more than a couple sips?"

She nods, "They're waiting on the dishwasher. Which is me. I'm the dishwasher, but I'll tell you what. You sit at a machine and play a few rounds and I'll make sure you don't go thirsty."

A sly smile spreads across my lips and I nod. "Good thing I don't have a cash back limit on my card. So which slots are the loosest?"

A snarling voice behind me interrupts, "Kinda an odd question to be asking a waitress, isn't it?"

Next thing you know, you'll be asking her whose legs are the loosest. I can tell you from experience, it ain't hers."

My body tenses, but I let the rude comment roll off my back. I stand up out of my chair and tip

my glass at Poppy, then turn around. I'm pleased to find that while I don't tower over the twatwaffle,

I have a couple inches on him. He's not some scrawny kid that I could squash like a fly, but if he

starts something with me, I don't think I'll have a hard time finishing it. Poppy backs away from the two of us as I stare her husband down.

I can practically see the steam billowing out of the dude's ears as he mean mugs me. Is this

fluffernutter trying to intimidate me? I've been more scared of little old ladies who threaten me with their handbag. Granted, being whacked with a handbag hurts, so I try not to find myself on the receiving end of that kind of assault. Besides, my Pops taught me to be kind to all women from the time they're in diapers to the time they're in diapers.

I've never been much of a gambling man. Sure, I bet on my own fights, but that's a different ballgame. I've never been one to feel the need to sit down at a card game and try to beat the house.

There was just never any appeal for me, but right now, I'm super tempted to go plop my ass down at this doofus's table and take a chance. I chew on my lip thoughtfully, then motion to the guy's uniform, "Dealer?"

He tenses and narrows his eyes as Poppy disappears from my peripheral view. "What's it to you? You're just an MMA punk. I still can't believe you threw that fight last night. Cost me four grand! Rumor's got it you bet on the other guy. Expecting to lose? Or just really that unlucky?"

A deep breath keeps me from exploding right there in the middle of the casino with everyone, including the eyes in the sky, watching, but I can feel the vein in my neck bulging with irritation.

"Dude pulled the equivalent of a sucker punch. In case you weren't paying attention, it was a knockout, not a technical knockout. That means I was knocked unconscious, by the way..."

Poppy shakes her head imperceptibly from where she's slipped around him. I make brief eye

contact with her and sigh, holding both hands up in resignation. I'm not walking away without getting

in a final dig, though, so I smart off, "Besides, talking about how loose someone's legs are is kinda a

strange thing to be saying about a waitress. I just wanted a club soda, and since some asshole made

her late to work, she hasn't had a chance to do the dishes yet and had to bring me this paltry little

thing. I like my club soda, since I don't drink alcohol. It makes gentlemen turn into blubbering idiots

who make awful decisions. Some might even call their actions *criminal*... But no matter, I was just

confirming with the lady that there wouldn't be a problem with me getting a refill, if you will..."

The look on his face is positively murderous as he turns and stomps off. I glance at Poppy with a

sheepish smile and find it impossible to read the look on her face. She looks like she's caught

somewhere between wanting to laugh and cry and I instantly feel guilty for provoking the guy. She's

probably going to be the one to pay for my inability to just walk away. "I... I'm sorry," I stammer.

She shakes her hand and holds up her hand, "Don't be. He deserved a tongue lashing. But I have

to ask - are you totally bonkers to provoke him like that?"

I shrug my shoulder, then catch her gaze with my own as I murmur, "To be honest? Probably, but

I'll tell you a secret... all the best people are..."



THIRTEEN

Poppy

I can't say I was completely surprised to see Storm show up at the casino that day after our tryst,
but to find myself still inexplicably drawn to him, despite the fact that we already broke every rule in
the book blows my mind. I know that he's something I can't have, despite the very real magnetic
draw I feel whenever we're in the same room. It's been torture ignoring the undeniable pull to him,
but I cannot enter that garden - not to paint roses red and not to have a taste of forbidden fruit.

Against public expectation, Storm fought again the Friday after we met and he beat the crap out of
his opponent. They didn't make it out of the second round before Storm pulled a 'ground and pound'
and literally knocked the guy out before either of them could deploy any dirty moves. They've had
five more fights for a grand total of seven, and Storm has marched away victorious every time after
that first fight. He's taken a couple of nasty punches and one really worrisome kick to the gut, but he's rallied against his opponent every time,

refusing to go down. Even when it seemed like his opponent
had him beat and they were headed for a technical knockout, Storm
would still somehow find his way
out of the hold and turn the tables on his opponent.

Due to his spectacular performance, Storm has been offered several
gigs in Las Vegas and he's
expected to take one of them. He'll be announcing nearer the end of
his stint in AC which one he's
going to be taking, but there's been offers from the MGM Grand,
Mandalay Bay, and several off-strip
places including the T-Mobile Arena. Of course, this is all hearsay. I
wasn't able to go to the fights
because I was working... and because Brad would have had a
conniption. How do I know he'd have
freaked out? Because I convinced one of the cage-side waitresses to
swap me with me for tonight,
Storm's eighth fight against The Rocket. And Brad literally lost it.
Started ranting and raving about
how being cageside is no place for a woman. Nevermind that he had
no issues with any of the other
waitress working it. I suspect he just doesn't want me anywhere near
Storm.

I still haven't told Brad that I slept with Storm and I probably never
will. That's my own secret
that will probably eat me alive from the inside out, but it's not going to
benefit anyone for Brad to
know. I doubt he'd even care. After our very public fight, he laid off
demanding sex. In fact, he hasn't even asked. Things have been somewhat
calm on the homefront, until Brad lost his mind that I was
going cageside. But it's not like he can stop me. I'm just going in there
to sell drinks and make some
extra cash, not find a side piece anyway. That's probably why he's
pissed anyway, because he knows
he won't be able to find one for himself if I'm down cageside while he
is.

For now, I'm just trying to finish things up and clean up the area the cocktail waitresses use so

that I can change into my cageside uniform and get down there before the fight starts. Storm was in

his usual spot this afternoon and I made sure he got his extra large glass of club soda with crushed ice

and he made sure to slip me a ridiculously large tip, along with a business card, which was

unexpected. I pocketed both and looked at them later, while I was on break and out of eyesight of

Brad. The front of the card has the information for his agent or manager or whatever he is, Peter, but

on the blank back, in handwriting that's loopy and surprisingly neat, is a string of numbers that I

assume are a phone number. Written across the top, just above the numbers are the words, 'Just in

case. Anytime. - S'

For now, I wrap the card along with my stash of cash tips that I've been saving here at the casino

and put them in the employee locker that I've been using for my personal effects while I'm working.

What Brad doesn't know is that I'm leaving my growing stack of cash there nightly, so that he doesn't

know it exists or how much I have. I've done well as a waitress and Storm's daily tips aren't hurting.

When I file for divorce, there's no looking back, so I have to make sure I'm financially stable. It's

going to take a while to do it, especially once Storm stops giving me up to a hundred bucks in cash a

day. Working at the casino instead of the ranch will be slow-going, but I'll get there someday.

I gather up the loaner uniform and step into one of the private bathroom stalls to change. I

shimmy off the atrocity that is my regular waitress uniform and unfold the loaner for cageside. I groan

when I realize that it's got a cross-cross back that will make wearing my bra impossible. At least I

thought ahead to wear a thong, because I knew the shorts would probably be pathetically small. And

boy is that an understatement. When I pull up the skin-tight hot pants, the only thing I'm relieved to

find is that they fit my body well enough that nothing literally shows, though it's a close call. If I had bigger hips, half of my ass would be hanging out of the bottoms of these 'shorts.'

I struggle to get the top on. It's big enough to cover my breasts, but again, just barely. There's a

pair of triangles that cover my nipples and most of the surrounding flesh, but the ties and straps that

complete the rest of the top leave very little to the imagination. How Amber wears this, I'll never

understand. Her boobs are bigger than mine! This thing makes the skimpy uniforms at the beer-and-

wings places look modest. I shudder as I gaze at my reflection, shaking my head. There's no way I'll

make it down to the arena in this without Brad noticing - and he's going to lose his shit when he sees it.

I almost jump out of my barely-there outfit when somebody bangs on the bathroom stall door.

"Come on Poppy! If you don't get down there, you're going to be late and then *I'm* gonna be in shit because my replacement ain't there on-time."

Opening the door, I step out sheepishly, feeling completely self-conscious. "I think it's too small

or something. How do you fit your ass in this?"

Amber shrugs with a giggle, "I don't. Those fighter types and their entourages are big tippers."

Each of em's got a whole team of men there to do their bidding, but that bigger one with the wild

hair... he's an interesting fella. I've seen him fight before in the past, and I've been at all of his fights this time around. Most of the guys want straight water or straight liquor, but not him... he wants--"

I cut her off with a laugh, "Club soda with crushed ice."

Amber nods her head with a look at me, "Yeah, how'd you know?"

I point at my neatly folded cocktail waitress uniform as I hand it to her. "He comes in here every

day and just sits in the casino, might throw a few twenties in the penny slots, but never a big gambler, never a big talker... but always orders club soda."

Amber nudges me with her shoulder, "Maybe he likes you. He'd certainly be an upgrade from

that... thing you call a husband. Sorry, Poppy, but I don't like him. At all. You're too good for him."

I sigh and blow out a breath as I look at her, then shake my head. "Marriage vows are marriage vows, Amber."

She grabs both of my shoulder and looks me in the eye. "And you're the only one upholding them, Poppy. Walk away, while you still can..."

She strips off her clothes right in front of me, then tugs on my cocktail waitress uniform. It

figures she has no hang-ups about her body when her usual uniforms has less coverage than some of

my underwear. She gives me a smirk and nudges me out the door, "Now go! The fight starts in twenty

minutes and you should've been there ten minutes ago. Go make yourself some money and don't

worry about what happens up here. Brad won't be able to get away from the bookie cage until the fight's already started and he wouldn't dare start crap during a fight."

It takes me another five minutes to get down to the arena where Storm's fight is taking place in just fifteen minutes. I slip in after showing my credentials at the door, then slide the card into the skimpy top and wind my way through the crowd. I meet up with Amber's boss, Nick, who shakes his head at me. "You've got some balls, Poppy. Well, obviously you don't, since you'd never be able to hide them in that getup, but Brad's going to shit a brick when he comes down here to deal with the bookie stuff."

I shrug my shoulder as I glance beyond Nick to where Storm is stalking in the corner of the octagon. I can't see his trademark hair, but I've heard that he keeps it tied back until it's time to fight, then he lets it loose. Apparently, it's intimidating to face a hundred and seventy pound man who looks like he's fresh out of the jungle. Right now, though, he looks calm and collected and extremely focused as he paces back and forth, pounding one fist against his palm repeatedly, then switching hands.

He's wearing a hooded, floor-length, bright blue robe that's open in the front, displaying his chiseled chest and enviable abs. A pair of loose blue shorts are slung low on his hips, grazing mid-thigh on him. Both his wrists and ankles are wrapped in strips of red tape that criss-cross over his joints. He has the hood of his robe pulled up over his head, but even from here I can see the wireless headphones covering his ears and he appears to be talking to himself.

A loud buzzer sounds throughout the arena and I scurry to the side of the cage opposite of Storm
and get to work, jotting down orders for specialty drinks based on tonight's fight. There's almost
always a fight going on in the casino's octagonal-shaped fighting cage, but Storm only fights twice a
week. From what I can see, he's getting the casino their money's worth on the fights - there are very
few empty seats in the arena and they're all on The Rocket's side.

I walk over to open bar and turn in my drink orders, watching Storm prowl in his corner. As the
bartender hands me a tray overflowing with beers and cocktails, a final warning buzzer sounds to let
people know to get to their seats because the fight is about to start. I take the tray, nodding at the
bartender as I weave back through the crowd from whence I came, dropping off drinks to eager
patrons who are ready for the fight to begin.

As I reach the end of line and pass off the last drink (and pocket the generous tip), I turn around
to see both fighters preparing to fight. I watch Storm as he shrugs off the robe, letting it pool on the floor around his feet. He kicks it back to one of the guys standings just behind him. Then he turns his
back to the octagon and pull off the headphones as he releases his hair from its tie. The mass springs
free, haloing his head in dark brown curls that reach his shoulders. He turns back around and rolls
his head from shoulder to shoulder, then slips a a mouthguard into his mouth and yanks on a pair of
red, fingerless fighting gloves.

He looks different than when I've seen him chilling in the casino. And like an entirely different
person than the caring man who took me to The Shroom and later made me enjoy sex for the first time

in years. But even with the hard lines of concentration on his face and his rigid stance as he bounces

from foot to foot in preparation for the buzzer that will signal the start of the fight, I can see glimpses of the easy friendship we've begun to form. But only glimpses, and as that buzzer sounds, the crowd

roars around me as the fighters clash in the middle of the octagon. Storm's hair flies wild around him

as he clashes with The Rocket and I'm captivated by the two men in the middle of the cage.

Until someone behind me slides their hand possessively onto my hip and startles me. I turn

around with a gasp and find myself eye to eye with Brad, who looks like he's about to try to swarm

his way into someone's pants. His voice is surprised as the recognition flashes across his face.

"Poppy? What are *you* doing down here? And why on God's green Earth are you wearing *that*?"

I shrug away from him, slapping his hand off my side. "I told you I was working cage-side

tonight. I'm making money, Brad. It's called a job. And shouldn't you be at yours?"

Brad scowls as he rakes his eyes along my overexposed body hungrily. "Coming down here to

watch the fight is *part* of my job. Bets are closed once the fight starts and the boss likes me to check into the fight to make sure nothing seems amiss, especially after jungle boy's suspicious loss the first

night. Boss don't trust him not to throw another fight, so he sent me down here to make sure he *finishes*.

Instead of finding a proper fight going on, I find the fighters prancing about in the cage and my *wife* being ogled by lowlife men with impropriety on their minds."

I motion up at the cage, where Storm currently has The Rocket twisted around his body and

pinned to the floor as he drives his fist into The Rocket's face. "Looks to me like he's fighting for real. It's kinda hard to fake blood. And besides, the only lowlife in this arena ogling me is *you*."

Brad growls at me and he's about to retort when our attention is drawn to the cage as the referee blows a warning whistle. The Rocket is struggling desperately to get out from under Storm's weight, but Storm isn't letting up. After landing half a dozen punches into The Rocket's face, he twists their bodies so that The Rocket is now facing the mat and drives his elbow into the back of the man's head. The Rocket's face slams into the mat with a spray of blood. Storm lets go of the guy and gets up off the mat.

He walks off, bunching and relaxing his shoulders as The Rocket writhes around on the mat, clearly hurt beyond an ability to get up. The referee blows a whistle and makes several hand motions. A spotlight centers on Storm as the referee walks over to him and lifts his right hand in the air. The scrolling ticker signs at the top of the arena flash 'TKO - Storm' and half the arena roars with delight, while the other half boos. I turn to see Brad's reaction, but to my surprise, he's nowhere to be found, so I do what any faithful wife would do - I go find him.



FOURTEEN

Storm

Despite the elation of winning a technical knockout against The Rocket in front of a sell-out

crowd, there's an uneasy feeling in the back of my mind. Everything from today has gone swimmingly

according to plan - including the phone call from Joe that despite some notable bruising and a hairline

fracture in my skull, I'm not beyond Stage Two of CTE yet and I can keep fighting for now, but that

there's still some very concerning things going on in my mind and that they're not willing to release

me from their care. I know I should be more worried about the findings than I have been, but I can't

just stop my entire life because of an injury. There's way too much riding on my continued ability to

fight. If it's not life-threatening, I'm not stepping out of the cage.

But I have agreed that I do have to be careful and get regular CT scans the day after every fight to

insure that there's no swelling and no further damage to my skull. The older gentleman who did my

initial CT scan said that most people in my condition are chomping at the bit to retire, but not me. I'm

twenty-nine years old and in peak physical condition. The doctors even agree that I couldn't be in

better shape, with the exception of the grenade in my head. Despite being cleared to fight, I've been

warned that a solid hit to the head *will* be the end of my career, so I've had to alter my fighting style slightly. Especially since there were other things mentioned that I can't bear to think about. But the doctors have agreed to let me continue in my career for now.

I can't go charging into a fight like a bull in a china shop. I've had to take a couple steps back

and become a defensive fighter, when I've always played offensive from the first buzzer. I've won

seven straight against The Rocket now, and despite his attempts to use my own moves against me, I've

managed to outmaneuver him every time. I'm feeling confident with the direction my life has taken

me, but something in the universe is calling out to me.

My phone rings suddenly while I'm changing my clothes following the fight. I'm not expecting

any phone calls, since I've already heard from the important people in my life. Joe called to confirm

my appointment in the morning for a follow up exam and CT. My Pops called to tell me he saw my

fight on pay-per-view and he was proud of how hard I fought for the win. Pete won't call me tonight.

He only calls when I've fucked up, so the less I hear from him, the better anyway. Besides, I don't

recognize the number flashing across the screen. I'm about to toss the screeching device onto the bed

when something yells at me to just answer it. I slide my finger to the right across the screen and

answer, "Hello?"

“Storm, thank God, you answered...”

Recognition flashes through my brain, but it takes me several minutes to form a coherent thought,

“Poppy?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Can you come get me?”

Instantly my body tenses. “All I have’s the bike, Poppy. But I can be there--”

She cuts me off before I can finish my statement, “Just get here, please. I need you, before I do something stupid...”

It doesn’t take much more prompting than that for me to finish throwing on my street clothes and

hurry down to where my bike’s still parked in the valet lot. My hair’s dripping wet from my after-

fight shower, but I don’t bother to put it up before slamming my helmet on my head. Within minutes of

Poppy ending our phone call, I’m on the open highway, speeding toward an address I’m not even sure

I can find. I’m just hoping that the GPS program that’s droning on in the bluetooth in my ear steers me

in the right direction, because the defeated tone in Poppy’s voice gutted me.

As I pull up to the elaborate modern home, I get a sense of foreboding. I cut the bike’s engine

and leave it parked at the end of the driveway, tugging off my helmet and leaving it on the seat as I

cautiously approach the intimidating home. It’s black and white and red all over with sharp angles

and enormous plate glass windows. And sitting on the front stoop among a spattering of clothing and

other personal effects, sits Poppy, her head in her hands.

I quicken my pace, worried that she's hurt. As I approach her, she looks up at me wearily. I

don't see fear on her face, I don't see pain... no, all I see on her face is defeat, like she's been dealt

the final blow in a battle she was expecting to lose. She motions around her with a sigh, "It's all mine, but I don't care."

I gasp, surprised by her admission. I don't know what shocks me more - the litany of clothes

strewn all over the front stoop or her complete resignation that it doesn't matter. Both are

heartbreaking realizations. She points to a small bag at her feet, returning her gaze to mine.

"Everything that matters from inside that house is in there. The rest of it is just material possessions that he paid for and thinks belong to him, so let him have them."

She stands up off the stoop and I do a double-take at her, my eyes going wide. "You were at my fight?"

Poppy nods as she looks down at her outfit, then shrugs, "Yeah, I was. Trying to make some extra

cash. I know the cageside girls make a lot in tips, and while your daily offerings have been generous,

it would have taken me awhile to get enough to leave."

My gut twists at her admission. "Poppy, if this was about money, why didn't you just ask?"

She shrugs. "You hardly know me, Storm. I'm a waitress at the casino where you're fighting.

We hung out once and while I've enjoyed our daily chit-chat on the gambling floor, once your six

weeks is up, you're out of here. How could I ask you for money when salvaging my craptastic life isn't your responsibility. You owe me nothing, Storm. Even this, what you're doing right now, is going above and beyond the call of duty for an acquaintance. And don't get me wrong, I appreciate it, but you've already done so much for me."

I nod solemnly. I'm not going to argue with her about it tonight, not when she's probably freezing in that God-awful getup they make the cageside waitresses wear. Not that it doesn't look fantastic on her. My dick is already at attention just from seeing the scandalous outfit on a woman that I've known intimately, and truthfully, want to know that way again. I shrug off my leather jacket and pull her into a hug without asking.

She tenses at first, but slowly melts into my arms, letting her body mold to mine. I wrap my jacket around her shoulders and glare at the front door as it pops open. The squirrel-like face of her idiotic husband appears in the doorway above an armful of various items. His eyes become slits as he stares at me holding his wife protectively. He dumps the pile of what I assume to be Poppy's personal effects onto the stoop, then turns and slams the door.

Poppy winces in my arms at the sound of shattering glass, then wraps her own arms around my waist, burying her face into my chest. She doesn't even bother to look back to see what the idiot threw out of the house, but my guess is that by this point, she doesn't care. I want to know what happened, but I doubt she's in a talking mood. I nudge her back gently and she looks up at me with unshed tears brimming in her eyes.

I offer her the most comforting smile I can manage. At least, I hope looks comforting and not

predatory. I whisper softly, "Come on. We can put your things in the saddlebag. Are you sure this..."

I reach down and pick up her small suitcase, "...is all you want to bring?"

Poppy pulls away from me, swiping at her nose and eyes with nod. "Yeah, nothing that Brad

bought me means anything. They were just trinkets he used to pay for my silence and cooperation. I'm

not going to be either anymore. I've suspected for a long time that he was cheating on me, but seeing it

with my own eyes was gut-wrenching. Even though it just confirmed what I already knew, seeing him

balls-deep between Amber's legs hurt. Now I know why she was so eager to swap with me tonight.

She wanted to get closer to him. He was pissed when he saw me at the fight, which by the way, did

you know you fight like a wild animal?"

She shakes her head slowly, then continues, "Anyway, when I got home from the fight, fully

prepared to find him seething from me trying to better myself, there she was, riding him like a cowgirl

with directional issues. She almost looked guilty when I walked in, like she regretted it, but not him.

He actually smirked and suggested I join in. That maybe Amber could teach me how to enjoy sex."

She shudders and I wrap my arms tighter around her, my need to put a fist into her husband's face

growing stronger with each passing moment. She trails off into incoherent sobs as she finally lets

loose the built-up tension that has her lithe frame rigid. I can feel her tears soaking through my shirt as her body shakes against mine. She's so invested in her release that she doesn't even notice when her

husband opens the door another time and lobs another handful of clothes out the door, followed by

half a dozen china plates, which shatter one by one on the stoop. It's almost amusing that such an

impetuous, violent man chooses to live in a glass house, because those who live in glass houses

shouldn't throw stones... or plates for that matter. I chuckle at my joke, a broad smile cracking my lips.

He glares at me and sneers, "Oh for fuck's sake, go get a room. But I must warn you, she sucks

in bed. Just lies there motionless like a limp noodle. You'd get more enjoyment from your hand."

With that, he slams the door again and Poppy jumps in my arms. I inhale a slow, deep breath,

trying to put a lid on the rage that's bubbling inside of me. I cannot let my anger get the better of me right now, because there's nobody here that can stop me once I let the maelstrom out and it will

destroy anything in its way as it creates a path of destruction. I lift her sobbing form into my arms and grab her suitcase, carrying her over to my bike.

I set her down on the seat and bring my hands to her face, using my thumbs to brush away the

tears that escape her eyes. Ignoring my greater urges, I lean my forehead against hers and gently kiss

along her tear-stained cheeks. "Shhhh," I murmur between kisses, "...he's not worth your tears, Poppy.

No man is..."

All is silent as I take a deep breath and rub my nose against hers. She shudders slightly, tilting

her face just enough that her lips brush mine. An electric jolt shoots straight to my dick as time stands still for the briefest moment that her mouth touches mine. As quickly as they touch, the moment is

gone, though the sizzling charge in the air remains. Her voice is soft and barely audible as she leans

back away from me and whispers, “I know. I’m not crying for him. I’m crying for the girl who wasted six years of her life believing that he was...”



FIFTEEN

Poppy

You’d think I’d be used to waking up alone by now, but it’s never a welcome feeling to wake up

to an empty expanse of bed. The bigger the bed, the lonelier the feeling when you wake to find

yourself solo in a heaping mass of nothingness. Just pillows, blankets, and the scent of a man you

cannot have. Storm’s essence is everywhere in this bed, but he is not.

After we arrived back to his hotel last night, he carried both me and my paltry bag of belongings

into his hotel room. He laid my suitcase on the floor in the entryway of his suite, and me in the

massive king-sized bed. While half of me was hoping he’d join me in the bed and help me forget

about all the things I can't unsee, the other half was begging for space. Storm listened to the other half and left me alone to sleep in his bed.

I sit up, rubbing my eyes as I push the covers down off my body. I groan when I see Amber's uniform still tied around my curves. I hadn't even had a chance to change out of it last night when I caught her and Brad playing cowboy games in our marital bed. I hadn't stuck around to see what else happened or listened to Amber's weak explanations. Of course, Brad had kicked her out of the bed and the house and demanded *I* tend to his needs now that I was home from work.

I'd just shaken my head at him and essentially told him to go to hell. I could smell from the doorway that he was drunk, but drunk or not, I'd finally confirmed with my own eyes what I'd suspected for years - Brad was cheating on me. Shaking, I'd dug through my apron and pulled out the business card that was still wrapped up inside the wad of cash I'd earned waitressing and done the only thing I could think to do - I'd called Storm and begged him to come get me.

And surprisingly, he had. Without a single argument or complaint, he'd come and rescued me from the front porch while Brad continued to throw all of my personal belongings in the front yard. I guess I should be glad he took his frustration out on inanimate objects, but it scared me to see him in such a rage all because I'd told him no. And I'd only told him no because minutes earlier, he'd had his dick buried in my coworker after bitching at me for taking on a job with a skimpier outfit because it paid more. So in retaliation, he'd fucked the girl who'd swapped uniforms with me for the night.

But none of that mattered once Storm had come riding in on his black steed. Sure, he's not a

knight in shining armor and his steed isn't actually a horse, but it was close enough. He'd rescued me

from years of mistakes and brought me to his suite in Egg Harbor to sleep, a welcome reprieve from

the starkness of the home I share with Brad. Perhaps, I should say *shared* because I'm not going back. I know I can't stay here with Storm, but I'll figure something out. I always do.

"Good morning, beautiful."

The velvety smoothness of the voice catches me off guard. I'm not used to hearing anything in the

mornings other than Brad demanding I pleasure him, or my alarm blaring at me to get out of bed. I

blink sleepily and blush, using my arms to try to cover my over-exposed body. Storm chuckles and

steps into the bedroom part of the suite and shakes his head, "Poppy, have you forgotten that I've seen

you naked? It was brief, and only once, but don't think I've so easily forgotten the raw beauty I got a glimpse of that night."

Now I *know* my face is crimson as he sits down on the edge of the bed. "Are you hungry?"

I stare at him incredulously, struggling to keep my eyes on his. I shake my head quickly. I don't

want to be any more of a burden on this man than I've already been, but my traitorous stomach has

other ideas. It growls loudly and my eyes widen into saucers as Storm chuckles and slaps his hands

on his knees. "I take it that's a yes. Hang tight."

He hops up off the bed and disappears out the doorway. He reemerges in the bedroom moments

later with my suitcase in one hand and a tray loaded with food balanced in the other. He flings my

small suitcase up onto the dresser and nods. “Figured you might want to put on some real clothes,

instead of, well... that...” He motions at me and all I can do is nod dumbly. I crawl completely out

from under the covers, drawn to the delectable smells coming from the tray.

With surprise in my voice, I look at Storm and ask, “You cook? Or did you order in?”

Storm shakes his head as he sets the tray down between us. There’s a plate loaded with

scrambled eggs, bacon, and what looks like a freshly baked croissant. Beside it is a bowl full of

diced fruit and another, smaller bowl that’s brimming with yogurt. Finishing off the offerings is a cup

of coffee, a steaming mug full of hot water with a variety of tea bags, and a big glass of orange juice.

“Neither,” he muses. “There are lots of benefits to staying in a hotel, including a fresh breakfast

buffet every morning. Now, is this to your liking? Because I can go get something else if it isn’t.”

My mouth drops open at his offer, but I shake my head quickly, motioning to the food. “No, no, this looks incredible!”

Storm nods, then murmurs, “I have milk and creamer in the fridge in the kitchenette if you desire

either for your coffee or tea? I wish I could do more.”

I just stare at him, my mouth agape. In four years of marriage, Brad has never once brought me

breakfast in bed. I call Storm in a frenzy in the middle of the night and not only does he race across town and pull me out of the most miserable night of my life and then give up his bed for me, but he brings me an impressive breakfast, then thinks he hasn't done enough for me?

Storm frowns as I sit there in shock. "We can go out if you'd prefer?"

I shake my head quickly, grabbing the tray before he can take it away. "No. No, this is great actually. I just, I'm not used to being treated like this."

Storm cocks one eyebrow and shakes his wild hair out of his face. "Like what? Like you matter?"

Because I assure you, despite what that lowlife has been filling your head with, Poppy, you matter.

And I'm not just saying that to try to get in your pants."

I giggle softly. "Wouldn't take much effort, I'm afraid. These shorts are pathetic. Besides, you already worked your way in my pants once. I don't think you'd have to try very hard to do it again."

Storm's eyes slam shut and his hand goes to his groin as he groans. "Don't put pictures in my head of things I cannot have, Poppy."

Frowning, I take the breakfast tray and shift it over to the bedside table. Then I scoot down to the end of the bed where he's perched like he's ready to bolt. I grab his hands gently and squeeze them.

"I'm not going to try to jump your bones again. Last time was you seeing a desperate woman in a vulnerable place and it was totally inappropriate. I do have manners, you know, even if I don't always act like it."

Storm's eyes flutter open and my heart skips a beat when they lock onto mine. He leans in

toward me, closing the distance between us until there isn't any, only a whisper's breadth of air. A

shiver snakes its way down my body, but before I can think or do anything further, Storm jerks back

away from me and shakes his head. "I can't, Poppy... it doesn't mean I don't want to, but I can't."

I narrow my eyes at him, watching for any sign that he might be lying or falsifying information,

but the look on his face is one of genuine pain. I swallow the lump in my throat and ask, "You

can't... or you won't?"

Storm looks stricken as I question his motives. He stands up off the bed and looks down at me

forlornly, then motions to the tray on the bedside table. "I can't. Believe me, if I could, I would've

slept in here with you last night and claimed you as mine, but life isn't that simple Poppy. Nothing's

ever that simple. Eat up. You are more than welcome to stay here, but I have an appointment up the

road in an hour that I cannot be late for."

My stomach twists as I take a sip of orange juice, watching him as he backs away from the bed.

"Oh... meeting someone?"

Storm shakes his head. "Not exactly. I mean, yeah, there's a someone I have to meet, but it isn't a

pleasure outing, I assure you. I have an appointment with a neurology doctor today to assess the

lingering damage that all the concussions I've suffered through the years have caused. Today, I find

out if I can continue fighting or if it's time to throw in towel."

I gasp, nearly choking on the orange juice. Its acidity turns sour in my stomach as I force it down,

“What?!? But you said...”

Storm nods with a sigh. “I know what I said, Poppy. I didn’t lie to you, but I didn’t tell you the whole truth.”

He walks back over to the bed with a heavy sigh and flops down on it. “I have what’s known as

CTE. Or chronic traumatic encephalopathy. Have you ever heard of it?”

I blink slightly, trying to remember where I’ve heard that term before. It sounds familiar, but I

don’t know anyone with it. Then I remember reading about it in some of the books Ms. Bianchi had

laying around the ranch. It’s a brain disorder caused by having too many concussions and it was in a

book about riding horses and how one has to be careful that they’re not thrown, so that they don’t

crack their head on the ground because enough concussions can lead to permanent brain trauma.

I gasp as the brevity of what he’s telling me crashes over me. “If you have it, why are you still

fighting? Isn’t it deadly?”

Storm shrugs. “Well, eventually, yeah, but I’m still somewhere between stage 1 and 2, so no

immediate concerns. I mean, one more concussion and that’s it for my career, but the real effects of

the disease won’t become obvious until I’m older and start going senile. If I’ve mashed my brain up

too many times, that’ll happen by the time I’m fifty or so, sixty if I’m really lucky. I’ll probably have full blown dementia before I can have a

mid-life crisis. But they won't be able to definitively
diagnose it until they can cut apart my brain...so for now, they just
want to keep a close eye on me
and check for lesions or swelling or anything that would indicate that
the disease has progressed."

My gut clenches with his admissions. "Storm, if it's so dire, then why
are you still fighting?"

He looks at me pointedly and reaches his hand up to my shoulder,
resting it there for a moment
before he slowly traces one fingers along my collarbone, stopping
briefly in each place where it was
broken just a few months ago. He clears his throat and looks up at me,
"It's who I am, Poppy... I'm a
fighter. Are you telling me that if Brad hadn't forbidden you from
going back to that ranch, that you
wouldn't be there now, trying to break the horse that threw you?"

I gulp because he right. He's absolutely right. I sigh heavily and scoot
closer to him, grabbing
both of his hands in my own. "Can I come with you?"

Storm nods and squeezes my hands. "Yeah... yeah, that'd be nice
actually. In case it's bad news.

I'm hoping with all I've got inside me that it's good news, but it could
always be bad. They could tell
me that my career is over and then I'd have to reset my board and start
all over."

I nod slowly, because I know exactly how that feels. "Let's see all the
moves through before you
admit defeat. You're willing to wipe the board clean when you're only
in check, but the game isn't
over until fate tells you 'checkmate'."



SIXTEEN

Storm

It's mid-afternoon before the doctors are done yammering on with their medical mumbo-jumbo.

For a group of people so worried about the condition of my brain, you'd think they'd have dumbbed

down all the jargon they used. Big words like dementia pugilistica and cognitive impairment are not

the kind of words a man like me chews on regularly. I'm a more matter-of-fact kind of guy. Don't

sugar-coat things and don't use fancy words to describe things. Just tell it to me like it is.

It didn't help matters that they initially refused to let Poppy accompany me anywhere. I'm well

aware of medical record violations and all that jazz, but it's *my* brain being discussed. I should be able to have anyone I want present for whatever the news may be. Eventually, they gave in and let her

back when I insisted that she's my girlfriend. Despite the fact that she isn't anything of the sort, the doctors relented and allowed her to join me in the consultation room along with Joe, my trainer and

Pete, my manager slash agent.

They were both quite surprised to hear me throw the ‘g’ word around.
Ever since my last one, I

swore I’d never put myself in the vulnerable position of giving
someone my heart ever again. So

naturally, both of them gave me the worried eyes look the entire time
the doctors were talking.

Between feeling like I was under constant scrutiny and the words that
should only be used in a

spelling bee, I walked out of that meeting feeling less than confident
about my future.

Thankfully, Poppy’d talked me into taking a cab to the doctor’s office,
despite it only being a ten

minute ride from the hotel. I’m not sure I’d be able to safely handle the
bike with my head swirling

full of possibilities of what my future may hold. One thing is certain...
my brain *does* show minor

shrinkage and permanent damage to some of the structures. The
doctors explained that this kind of

damage is irreversible, but that further damage can be prevented by
retiring in the near future. It was

heartbreaking news, but it wasn’t definitive. The doctor didn’t say it
was absolutely imperative that I

retire now, but it was certainly hinted at. He told me I have maybe
another year, tops, to fight, before

the damage is going to be severe enough to start affecting my daily
cognitive abilities.

Poppy’s delicate hand hasn’t let go of mine since we climbed into the
cab following the

appointment. My thoughts are all over the place as she tries to comfort
me and tell me that things are

going to be okay and that I’ll figure everything out. I’m supposed to be
comforting *her* after her jealous ass of a husband threw her out of the house,
along with all of her stuff, for catching *him*

cheating. I try to school my thoughts to stop jumping all over the
place, but it isn’t doing much good

as we pull up to the hotel. I hand the cabbie a hundred dollar bill and climb out with Poppy glued to my side.

Once we're safely inside my hotel suite, I let myself fall apart slowly but surely. Poppy tries to comfort me, encouraging me to take a seat on the couch in the living area. She disappears into the kitchenette and returns a few minutes later with two steaming hot cups of tea. I blink at her and she hands me one and shrugs, curling up beside me with her own mug of tea. "Whenever the world seems upside down, I like to take a moment and savor something simple, like tea. It's just water and tea, but it can do so many things. It can calm, it can wake, it can blend... it's a blank canvas. We just have to tell it what we need from it..."

I close my eyes and inhale sharply. What invades my sense isn't the tea, though. It's Poppy, in every way. The very subtle scent of her soap, the faint smell of pineapple from her lunch, and something else I can't quite put my finger on. I have no doubt that every fragrant tendril in the air is coming from her, though. I squeeze my eyes tighter as I gulp down the tea, letting the heat of it warm me from the inside. When I do finally open my eyes, Poppy is looking at me with a smirk on her face.

"Is it good?"

I nod dumbly, then quickly change topics, looking at Poppy seriously.

"Don't go home to him."

She gasps, nearly dropping her mug of tea. Instead, she sets it down with unsteady hands.

"Where else can I go?"

I motion around the hotel room, “For the next two weeks, at least, mi casa es su casa.”

Poppy shakes her head quickly, “I... I couldn’t ask you to do that....”

Chuckling, I set my own tea down and lean over the middle of the couch, so that I’m invading her space. “You didn’t ask, I offered, but I don’t know if I can sleep on this couch for fourteen days... you’re gonna have to share the bed.”

Poppy tenses as our eyes meet. She scrambles off the couch quickly, shaking her head. “I’ll have to go home to him eventually. He’s going to be livid that I left as it is.”

I growl, the sound surprising even me, as I reach the end of my rope with her pretending like everything is normal between that dolt of a man that she’s married to and herself. I take a deep breath to calm myself and grab both of her hands. “Why, Poppy? Why go back to him? He doesn’t deserve you, not in the slightest. Stay with me...”

She gasps and I can’t help but smile and tease, “Oh come on, I’m not *that* ugly!”

She shakes her head, her voice dropping an octave. “No, you’re not. Not at all...”

I groan as the meaning of her words slaps me like a high school fool that just mouthed off. I’m sitting beside her on the couch, trying to find my bearings to center my mind that’s racing through a thousand possibilities right now. She tightens her hands around mine and murmurs, “Will you teach me to fight?”

I jerk my hands back and shake my head quickly. “Absolutely not. But I will teach you how to defend yourself, because Poppy, if you go back to him, you’d better know how...”

Poppy nods and stands up off the couch, motioning to the floor. “Show me, Storm. Because whether my marriage is over or not, I’m going to have to face Brad again at some point. Show me how to defend myself...”

I stand up off the couch too, my eyes watching her as she pulls the small coffee table across the room to clear out a small area in front of the couch. I motion for her to move, and she does. I gather up the tea mugs and set them in the kitchen, then set about moving the furniture all out of the room so that we’re left with a small square of open space.

“If you’re on your feet, you can run. But if you go down, you have to be prepared to protect the most sensitive parts of your body. And this goes for defending against anyone, not just him. Protect your chest, your head, and your gut. A good blow to any of the three can knock you out and if you’re unconscious, you’re completely vulnerable.”

I get down on my knees and motion for her to do the same. “I don’t know how much of my fight you saw, but only half of what I do is throwing punches and kicks. A large part of it is rooted in wrestling. Because whoever has the upper hand has the advantage.”

She watches me curiously, then drops to her knees across from me. I inhale unsteadily, then ask her, “Do you trust me?”

I lick my lips to wet them and pull my shirt off over my head. “Don’t want to stretch it out of shape. I don’t have a lot of nice clothes.”

Poppy nods and does the same with her own shirt. I swallow hard as it lands on the floor behind

her, leaving her in a pair of knit shorts and a sports bra. I glance down at my own attire of gym shorts and hope that I can keep myself under control as I show her the basics of defense. “Are you sure you’re okay with me touching you?”

Poppy levels her gaze at me, “If you can... I won’t stop you, but I’m not intending to let you pin me down.”

She leaps at me unexpectedly and gets her arms tightly around my torso before I can say another

word. It was a brave move, but it’s sloppy and I’m easily double her weight. I shake my head and

drop my shoulder into her chest, twist our bodies and pin her to the floor easily. “Know your

opponent’s weaknesses. If you don’t know them, stall and learn them. Then exploit them.”

She winces from the floor and I move my arms off of her, then offer her a hand up. She takes it

and I pull her up to her knees. “What’s my weakness?”

She frowns as she lets her eyes rove over my body. “Besides your head, which I’m not going to

get near, you don’t have any. Your legs are strong and flexible, so you could just as easily pull me

down with them as your arms if I try to dominate you from above. And if I try to go underneath you

and roll you, you’ll just squish me because you’re so much bigger than me.”

I nod, "So you're tapping out before you try?"

She gasps and crosses her arms over her chest. "I didn't say I give up!"

Smiling, I drag my eyes down her torso to her legs. I can see the definition of the muscles of her

thighs as she sits on her heels. I scoot closer to her and motion to her legs, then run hand over her

thigh gently. "Your experience riding horses means that you have powerful legs. Use them!"

She sits there, silent, for several moments and I start to worry that I've offended her. Then she

nods and scoots across the floor to where I'm squatting. She motions me closer to her with her finger

and I oblige, leaning toward her, stretching my back. She closes her eyes for a moment and lets out a

low growl, then slides her legs out from under her. She slides her body underneath mine and wraps

her legs around my torso tightly, then twists her hips, pulling me off center and sending me crashing

onto my side. The girl is certainly tougher than she looks...

I grunt as I try to wriggle free from her grasp, but she tightens her thighs around my waist. I nod,

amused. "Shit, that was impressive. I didn't think you'd be able to take me down. But the real

question is - can you *keep* me down? Or are you just as trapped as me?"

I lay there without fighting against her to give her a chance to think it over. When thirty seconds

pass, I drive my elbow down into the cheap hotel carpet and roll us so that, despite her legs still

being wrapped around my waist, she's now flat on her back on the floor with me leaning over her.

“You left yourself vulnerable by not having your next move planned. It’s great to take down your opponent, but if you don’t keep them down, you’re going to get hurt...”

She squirms underneath me and I groan as she arches her back. When she relaxes, she slides down my body slightly, her ass rubbing against my shorts. Both of us stop moving when my dick joins the party. “Sorry,” I murmur, “...he doesn’t realize he’s not invited to the party...”

I shove my hand down against my crotch, between us and she gasps. “There shouldn’t be this much tension between us, Storm. It’s just a wrestling lesson.”



SEVENTEEN

Poppy

I nod quickly, taking a deep breath to try to center my thoughts and get them as far away from his muscled body on top of mine as I can manage. He murmurs, “Maybe so, Poppy... but the men I fight don’t grind their asses against my dick, plus I’m usually wearing a cup, so if they do, I don’t notice.”

Right now, I can't help but notice."

I nod, understanding what he's saying. I release my legs from around his waist and he rolls us

back over so that I'm now straddling his stomach. "Maybe this was a bad idea," he whispers.

I shake my head, slinging my hair back over my shoulder as I dig my knees into his sides.

Leaning down over I narrow my eyes at him. "Bad idea or not neither of us is pinned, so neither of us is winning."

He nods and arches his back underneath me. "And you're not watching all of my weapons, Poppy."

I frown at him and in response, he sits up halfway and reaches his arms up behind me, grabbing

hold of the band of my sports bra. I gasp at first, but then I set my face in stone and twist left at my

stomach, then twist the other way sharply. I smirk as my sports bra is yanked over my head, leaving it

in his hands as I roll onto my side, in an attempt to get to my back.

"What are you doing?"

I shrug at him as he flexes the muscles in his stomach in an attempt to keep me upright so he can

look at my breasts that he just uncovered. A gleam flashes in his eyes as he licks his bottom lip. I

shake my hair back out of my face, and I hardly notice when his gaze locks onto the mounds of flesh

that jiggle as I do. Groaning, I can feel his cock hardening and he smirks up at me. He knows I can feel it.

Feeling sassy, I retort, “You should really pay attention to all of my weapons too, Storm.”

There’s a growling that rumbles through his chest as he keeps his eyes glued on my breasts, and
specifically, the bright pink nipples that harden as the cold air assaults them. He bends at the waist
and wraps his arms around my back to steady himself as his mouth captures one of them. I squeal
softly as I freeze, my gaze dropping down to meet his as he looks up at my face and sucks on the
pebbled nub that’s lodged in his mouth.

I bite down on her bottom lip as an unexpected sensation of pleasure ricochets through my body.

I squirm where my legs are still wrapped around his waist and he lets go my breast, then lengthens

his body so that he can capture my lips, if only for a brief second. As he pulls back, he demands,

“Fight me, Poppy...”

And then it’s suddenly a game of cat and mouse as both of us jockey for dominance, our bodies

rolling across the floor. I unlatch my legs from his waist as I struggle to get out from underneath him, but he keeps my back pinned to the floor with his hands pressing my shoulders down as he straddles

my waist. Leaning down to my chest, he slides his tongue along the valley between my breasts. The

resulting moan that topples out of my mouth catches me by surprise as the bulge in his gym shorts
grows more noticeable.

He continues his journey with his tongue up and over my collarbone, along my neck and finally

across my lips, which I part in invitation. When I do, he doesn’t hesitate to barge his way in. Letting

go of my shoulders, he brings his hands up to the side of my face,
kissing me like the world is ending
and he may never get another chance. I twist my body underneath his,
bringing my hands up to his
back where I drag my nails down along his skin.

To my surprise, I hungrily return the kiss, though my body is still
twisting underneath him in a bid
for dominance in our fight. Which I gain as I sit up suddenly and snake
my arms around his body,
grabbing hold of his gym shorts and yanking them down to his knees.
He jerks his mouth away from
mine and sits up, staring down at me in surprise as I say, “I *am* fighting
you, but I watched how you fought last night and you definitely don’t fight
fair, so I’m not fighting fair either...”

As my words trail off, both my eyes and hands land below the belt
where his cock has sprung
free of his shorts that are puddled at his knees. The muscles in his belly
tighten as I wrap my hand
around his length with a smirk. His entire body shudders. He stares
down at me as I glide my hand up
and down his dick. And I can tell it feels good. So good, in fact, that he
leans his head back and
closes his eyes when I do, temporarily forgetting about our fight.

He barely notices me wriggling my legs out from under him, but when
I lock my ankles behind his
neck seconds before I let go of his cock, he realizes I watched his fight
a lot closer than he thought I
did and that I’ve picked up some of his moves. I twist my body and
he’s propelled forward, landing
halfway on his back and halfway on his side. He growls and turns
himself completely onto his back
as I try to scurry away. “Oh, no you don’t,” he spits as he grabs my
leggings and yank them down. To
his surprise, I’m bare underneath them.

“No panties?” He muses at me as I shrug, twisting my body until the leggings slip completely

free of my body. Once again, staring at me naked like he’s never seen something so breathtaking.

I glare at him, then cross my arms over my chest. “Didn’t realize there was a chance of someone yanking off my pants...”

The sexual tension in the air crackles as we stare each other down. But neither of us is backing

down from what we set out to do. Our bodies clash in a desperate attempt to jockey for the upper-

hand. We roll from side to side, our bodies locked together in a twist of limbs. Until he doesn’t

recover from a stalemate fast enough and gives me the advantage. I see my opening and pin him on

his back, my knees locked to the sides of his face as I hold him down. “Pinned ya...”

Something feral inside of him is set loose as he reaches his hands up behind me and digs his

fingers into my cheeks, tugging me forward. I gasp as he does because he’s yanked my pussy right

up against his mouth. He doesn’t wait to ask for permission as he skates his tongue along my slit and I

stop fighting him instantly. My head snaps forward and my gaze locks with his as he pulls his hands

forward to my hips and digs his fingers into my skin.

“Storm... what... what are you doing?”

He growls against me as he asks incredulously, “Haven’t you ever had your pussy eaten?”

I shake my head wildly as the muscles in my thighs tighten. “No, God no... why would a man want to eat my pussy?”

He shakes his head, his curls flinging about wildly against the floor. “I can’t believe that prat has never buried his face between your thighs. Why would I want to? Fucking hell, Poppy... because it tastes amazing.”

As he finishes saying this, he plunges his tongue inside me, then drags it up along my clit, where he circles it, laving the tip of his tongue over what’s probably the most sensitive part of my body. My entire body goes rigid above him as a surprised moan tumbles out of my lips. Nobody has ever done this to me before and I don’t know what to do. My gaze darts down to his as he smirks against me, then edges his hands along my hips until they’re resting on my inner thighs. He uses the leverage he’s gained there to pull my legs apart and give him unadulterated access to my center. When he realize I’m not going to stop him, he drops any attempts at going slow and buries his mouth into my pussy, raking his teeth lightly along my clit as he plunges his tongue inside of me over and over again.

I’m mewling above me as he continues to lavish my cunt with his tongue like I’m some kind of delicacy. I jerk away from him suddenly with a gasp. “Stop,” I whisper.

He sighs, but does as I ask. He’s probably worried that I’m about to go flying out of here like he just lit my ass on fire. Instead, I slap at his hands until he lets go of my thighs. I scoot down his body, dragging my wetness along the taut skin of his chest and I shudder as his rippled muscles grind against

my cunt. It's erotic in the most sinful way possible. He's about to open his mouth and say something

when I lift up off of him and turn my back to him, murmuring, "There's no reason for me to be the only one who gets to feel good."

He acts dumbfounded by my reaction until I lift my ass up in the air as I lay down over his body.

Brad may never have eaten me out, but I'm not completely inexperienced. By the time he realizes

what I'm going to do, there's no way he can stop me, even if he wanted to. I take a deep breath and

encase the crown of his cock in my mouth. I swirl my tongue slowly around and flick the tip of it into

the indentation on the underside where a pearl of pre-cum has materialized. My heart thuds in my chest

as I slide my lips down his shaft, enclosing nearly half of his cock inside my mouth.

White-hot pleasure zips through my body like lightning as he reaches up and grabs my hips,

jerking me back within reach of his hungry mouth. He delves his tongue inside of me, and I gasp

around the head of his cock. Within moments of his constant assault on my clit, my body tenses above

him as the slick of my release smears over the bottom half of his face, coating his beard and

moustache in a viscous offering. He laps up every bit that his tongue can reach, then resumes flicking

his tongue across my swollen clit as my body is wracked with pleasure.

I squirm above him, but his mouth is buried in my pussy and he doesn't have the chance to warn

me as his own release slams into him, his dick pulsing as he spills his seed into my mouth. I don't

flinch as I take him deeper and deeper between my lips until the crown of his cock bumps against the back of my mouth. He digs his fingers into my hips, licking and laving everything between my thighs that he can reach. I milk his dick with my lips as I hold the base of his cock tightly in my hand. I work them in tandem along his length until there's nothing left to spill and he growls against my pussy, placing a single kiss against my clit as he gently pushes me off of him. I roll over onto my back, gasping for air as I lay there, my eyes wide and my chest heaving. "What... the hell... was that?"

He smirks as he drags the back of his hand over his mouth to wipe away some of the wetness that's glistening in his facial hair. He glances over at me with a serious look on his face. "That, Poppy... is what happens when two people click on a primal level... and it gets better. The more you know about someone, the more connected you are, and the more explosive reaching orgasms together can be. Poppy, I don't just want something physical with you, though. I want to get to know you every other way I possibly can..."



EIGHTEEN

Storm

Poppy has been abnormally quiet for the three hour drive through the countryside to upstate New

York. I have to admit, I haven't been here since I was a kid running away from my troubles, but it's

one of the best kept secrets of the Northeast. Right now, it's mid-June and everything is green with a

smattering of every hue of the rainbow in the open fields that line the two-lane highway we've been

travelling on for the last hour.

I glance over at Poppy and nudge her, "Penny for your thoughts?" She shrugs, shifting

uncomfortably in the seat. It's been almost two weeks since her husband threw her out of their shared

home and she temporarily moved in with me at the hotel in Egg Harbor. But the unanswered question

of what she's going to do when we get back from upstate New York still hangs heavy in the air. I

checked out of the hotel this morning.

My contract with the Wonderland casino ended last night with a scary bout in the cage against

The Rocket. He's been fighting dirtier and dirtier as our engagement progressed over the last six

weeks and last night, he took a cheap shot at my head. I don't know how much of my struggle with

CTE has become public knowledge, but even I would never intentionally aim for a man's head - and I

damn near invented fighting dirty. He didn't land the move, but The Rocket attempted a rabbit punch

and was instantly disqualified for unsportsmanlike conduct.

That kind of attack, where the aggressor tries to land the ball of the hand or elbow into the base

of the skull is strictly prohibited. Even in a sport as barbaric as MMA, it's considered too dangerous

because if he'd landed it successfully, it can cause all kinds of brain damage, including detaching the

brain stem from the brain itself. It's one of the few strikes that can cause instantaneous death for even an otherwise healthy opponent.

The match was called immediately, but it sent Poppy into panic mode. I reassured her that I was

fine, but she still wanted to check me over and she insisted we go to the doctor's practice first thing in the morning to get the old noggin scanned yet again. We won't hear the results for a few days, but I

think it made her feel better that I didn't fight her on the scan. Pete and Joe were pretty thrilled too

when I showed up without some insane request for take out. As we were leaving the office, I

overheard Pete tell Joe, "I don't know what Storm is doing with this girl, but I like her."

Of course, I had to let them know I heard them, so I retorted, "Yeah, me too." It was enough to

shut both of them up and make Poppy turn sixteen shades of red. I ribbed her for the first hour of the drive to upstate about how red her cheeks went when I mentioned I liked her and it made her turn red

all over again. Of course, when I told her I wasn't joking, she went silent on me for awhile. She

finally started talking to me again, only to clam up again when we crossed the state line. I have no

idea what's going on in that pretty, little head of hers right now, but I wish I did.

"Storm, what am I going to do when this trip is over?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I imagine find a new job, because you and I both know that working at the

casino is never going to cut it for you."

She nods thoughtfully as I turn the car down a gravel road that winds underneath a weathered sign

that reads, 'Bianchi Ranch.' She sighs as she looks up at the sign, then twists her face up with a grunt.

"I'm more worried about where I'm going to live, Storm. You've been so generous letting me crash

with you, but I literally have nowhere to go. I tried to go by the house the other day while Brad was at

work and he's changed the locks."

I growl as I grip the steering wheel and glance over at her, "I'm not comfortable with you going

near that prick, but I know that I have no say in what you do with your life. Just please be careful

around him. I think he's just waiting for you to find the trigger to explode."

She nods slowly, swallowing as she stares out the window. Several buildings come into view,

jutting up from an expanse of green that must cover acres. Poppy smiles and rests her hand against the

window of the passenger seat, staring through the glass at various animals that are grazing on the

grass that's so green, it looks fake. "Wow, Eli did a number on this place. I've never seen the grass

so green. Or so many flowers. I bet Ms. Bianchi is just tickled."

"Who's Eli?"

Poppy turns on her seat to look at me as the car rolls to a stop. "Oh, he's Ms. Bianchi's

daughter's fiance. That's a long story for another time, but he's a gardener and ever since he and

Ashley became engaged, he's moved out here to the ranch to take care of the plants. My brother,

Hunter, takes care of the animals along with his girlfriend, Raven. Raven took my job when the horse

threw me.”

I nod, chuckling slightly. “So which horse threw you? I wanna make sure I steer clear of it,
because I don’t have the gumption to get my head knocked around anymore than it’s already been.”

Poppy narrows her eyes at me like I’m trying to crack a bad joke, so I hold up both hands, “I’m
serious. You wouldn’t catch me dead on the back of a horse, but they can still be dangerous from the
ground. Joe told me about a jockey he used to work with that took a hoof to the thigh. It was *gross* to see, all black and green and purple, but Joe said the jockey got lucky it was only a hairline fracture.
He said that horse could’ve shattered it... kinda like...”

Poppy shudders as I trace my finger tip along her exposed collarbone. She reaches up and grabs
my wrist, shaking her head. “Storm, what are we doing?”

I point out the window at the ranch all around us. “I thought we were coming to visit your
brother? And to get Raven hooked up with all the details of the clinical trial they’re starting with the
drug. I should be a shoo-in because of my documented CTE. But you said she’s got a pretty
significant brain trauma herself, so I don’t see why they wouldn’t take her into the full trial.”

Poppy nods slowly, twisting her hand so that she can interlace her fingers with mine. She looks
up at me pointedly and shakes her head, “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

I pull my hand back from hers as electricity shoots through my veins. “I know, and I don’t know

what to tell you right now. You're married, Poppy. As much as I care about you and as curious as I am about a future with you in it, I can't continue to mess around with a married woman. No matter how much I *want* to."

Poppy frowns. "What about what *I* want?"

I nod slowly. "What *do* you want? You haven't really told me. I mean, it's been great waking up next to you, and sharing my days *and* nights with you. Cat seems to really like you and she doesn't like many people. Certainly not girls that come in with me. You may have had a haunting past with the

jerk, Poppy, but I want your future. I want to make you happy, but you haven't told me what *you* want and I can't proceed until I know."

Poppy's mouth hangs open momentarily as she struggles to give me an answer. She sits there

staring so long, that both of us are startled by a loud knock on her window. I roll down her window

halfway and the pitch black face of a horse pokes its head in through the opening. Poppy squeaks in

surprise and flattens herself back against the seat, a hint of panic on her face. "Uh, Liberty... hi..."

I chuckle, "Oh, so this is the famous Liberty I've heard so much about? If she's feral and

unbroken, why is someone riding her?"

Poppy's face turns to stare at mine so fast, I'm worried she's got whiplash, "What? Nobody can ride her!"

I motion through her window as the horse backs up, trotting around in a circle playfully. "I know

my brain's been jostled around a bit, but unless I'm hallucinating, and if I am we better call Joe,

there's definitely someone on her back."

Poppy shakes her head, "That's impossible. Hunter wouldn't go near her!"

A soft, tinkling, almost child-like voice responds to Poppy with a laugh, "Hunter didn't break her... I did." There's a flurry of motion outside the car door, then a young woman with pitch black hair and fair skin is leaning in the window. I put the window down the rest of the way so she can rest her elbows on the window frame as she peers in at Poppy. "Hey, Pop. Good to see you."

Poppy's mouth falls open, "Raven! You *broke* Liberty? What did she break first?"

Raven shrugs as she tugs one of her ruby red lips between her teeth, then releases it, "Well, besides your collarbone, Hunter's pride, and almost Eli's face... nothing... oh, did you know she loves apples?"

The girl named Raven reaches into a crossbody bag slung over her diminutive frame and produces an apple, which she offers to the horse. The horse makes a sound that sounds pretty close to a donkey, then bites into the offering in Raven's hand. She smiles and pats the horse on the nose, then stands up out of the window and chitters, "Come on inside, Poppy! Hunter can't wait to see you! Oh, and wait until you see the Anatolians! They're enormous! Oh, oh... and two of the hembras gave birth! Both live young!"

Poppy smiles, but I can tell it's forced. Something is bothering her and I'm going to get to the

bottom of it. I make a motion to Raven and smile, "We'll be up in just a minute, okay? How are those pills working out for you?"

Raven shrugs, "Sure wish they'd stop the buggers from happening, but I don't think I'd be doing much of anything without them... at least not things I'd want to write home to my sister about. She was over my shenanigans, but the drug has helped a lot. Are you the man with the plan I have to thank?"

I nod with a smile, "Something like that, yeah. I've taken a few knocks to the head and scrambled my brain up a bit. I'm two pieces of bacon short of breakfast in there."

Raven bursts out laughing and looks at Poppy, "Oh, I like him, Pop. Anyway, I'll be at the ranch hand house if you need me. Just gotta go put Liberty up."

With that, the young girl takes off walking toward an enormous barn with the black horse following her, while Poppy sits there in her seat, silent as a mouse with her hands folded in her lap.

After what seems like forever, she turns to me with tears in her eyes, "What am I doing, Storm? The whole world has moved on without me, like it never even needed me. The ranch is fine without me.

Brad is fine without me. Hunter's fine without me, happy even, which is weird because he was the one who said he'd never settle down after my catastrophe of a marriage. I know they're not married, but still... they seem pretty seriously happy. And I'm just floundering here... nobody needs me anymore."

I reach across the front seat and grab her hands tightly in one of mine.
“That’s not true, Poppy.
You *are* needed!”

She shakes her head sadly. “By whom?”

I slap my free hand against my chest. “By me, Poppy. *I* need you and I don’t even have the right to need you. But I care what happens to you, more than you realize. You have burrowed your way
into my very soul and I’m going to be completely lost when I leave Atlantic City and you go on about
your life like I never even existed.”

Poppy gasps in surprise as she looks up at me, her eyes a rainbow of colors. “He owns me,
Storm. You deserve someone who’s able to reciprocate your feelings. Someone you can be with in
public. I’ll ruin your reputation...”

I shrug my shoulders and lean across the front seat of the car so that I’m close enough to her that I
feel her staccato breaths as she nervously inhales and exhales. “Fuck my reputation. My career’s
damn near over, anyway. Who gives a shit about a reputation? And nobody is going to say a Goddamn
thing to me about you when we’re in public. If they do, I *am* a fighter by nature, Poppy. I’ll just remind them where my reputation came from to begin with...”

“I can’t just ask for a divorce, Storm...”

My heart lurches in my chest. Even though I was thinking it, I hadn’t specifically asked her to
divorce Brad. “And why not?”

She sighs. “He’ll bury me with his money. He’s loaded from being a bookie. I can’t even hope

to afford half the attorney he's going to retain."

I close my eyes and try to count to three in my head, but it's not working. I growl as I open my eyes again, "Poppy, all you have to do is ask...and I can get you the best lawyer in New Jersey. It's a no-fault state, so you don't even have to have a reason. Just tell them you want out and you can probably get half of everything."

She stammers at me, "But, but... lawyers are expensive and there's no way he's going to just settle. He's going to want to be in charge of it every step of the way. I belong to him and he won't let me go without a fight."

"Poppy... are you forgetting who you're talking to? I'm not some two-bit street fighter hoodlum.

Not anymore... If he wants a fight, well now he's got one... and you have powerful allies on your side. Pete's brilliant with contracts - do you have a prenup with the asshole?"

Poppy shakes her head slowly. "No, we were young, stupid, and in love."

I grin. "Good, that just means you demand as much as you can. Any decent lawyer should be able to achieve that. I mean, damn honey, your soon-to-be-ex-husband is pond scum."

She twists her hair around the fingers of one hand, "But I can't afford that kind of lawyer."

I shake my hand at her. "Stop it with that nonsense, Poppy. I'll pay for the lawyer. Don't worry about it. You do realize I cleared six figures for that limited engagement, right? With The Rocket's DQ last night, I'll probably even get

some of *his* purse by default since he reneged on the contract stipulations to fight clean. If it means getting you out of that rabbit hole and away from Wonderland

completely, then Alice... every adventure requires a first step...so take it with me..."



NINETEEN

Poppy

After spending over a week in upstate New York, I'm reluctant to leave the ranch with Storm. He

chuckled this morning before we left and said he's be willing to stay indefinitely. That we could just

run away from our problems like a couple of crazy teenagers and I have to admit I was tempted.

Despite me being forced to quit, Ms. Bianchi said Storm and I could stay in the ranch hand house with

Hunter and Raven for as long as we needed. Well, at least until she hires on the new ranch hand. But I

graciously turned down her offer.

I told Storm he could stay behind of course, but he said he's not going to let me face Brad alone.

Truthfully, if I didn't have a Brad problem right now, I probably would've agreed to to Ms. Bianchi's

offer. Despite still having zero desire to try to ride Liberty, I do miss Dallas and Fiona, plus there's seven miniature horses milling about the ranch now that seem like they're quite a hoot! I promised I'd

come back and visit sometime, but we came out here for me to visit Hunter and for Storm to give

Raven paperwork for the headache drug trial they'll be doing together. Leaving this morning sucked,

but the ranch is in good hands between Ashley, Eli, Hunter, and Raven.

My heart is pounding in my chest as Storm and I walk into the Wonderland casino hand in hand..

It's not that the attention from Storm makes me nervous, but the attention from everyone else who

whispers about us as we walk by isn't doing anything to help settle my nerves. Brad was once

charming like this too, and if the daggers he's shooting in my direction are any indication, he isn't

thrilled to see me with anyone but himself. Right now, my soon-to-be jealous ex-husband is staring at

the back of his head with such rage, that if looks could kill, Storm would've keeled over right there

on the casino floor.

Thankfully, Brad can't leave the cage while bets are being placed, so he won't be able to give

me the third degree for a while. If I'm lucky, I can slip the divorce papers into his employee locker,

turn in Amber's uniform (I have no clue what ever happened to my own), and get the hell out of dodge

before he can cause a scene. I know that Brad is going to go berserk when he finds the divorce

papers, but that's one of a dozen reasons that I filed in the first place.

It doesn't help matters that the man garnering my attention is Braxton Storm. He's a belt-winning

mixed martial arts fighter and hot doesn't even begin to cover it. He's tall, dark, and handsome

alright... charming too. Just the kind of man Brad loves to hate. Men like Storm should come with a

warning label. At six foot, two and muscled like a brick wall, he redefines being ripped. With

bedroom eyes and a honey complexion, he could charm the panties off any woman. I should know...

he's done it me more than once. But there's stories about him out there that Brad made sure I knew

about. I don't know how much I trust anything coming out of Brad's mouth, but it's something I felt the

need to discuss with Storm anyway. Storm didn't deny anything and while he's no Saint, Brad would

give the devil a run for his money.

"Oooo girl, Storm was definitely picking up what you were putting down out there."

Though I'm jumpy as hell, I turn around slowly to face Margot, the only other cocktail waitress

here who's over the age of twenty-one. In Jersey, you can serve alcohol at eighteen, but as soon as a

cocktail waitress hits twenty-one, most of them transfer to the blackjack room where they can double

as a dealer. Or down into special events like Amber did. Twice as many hours, twice as much pay...

and a front row seat to having Brad as your supervisor in either case.

I've been there, done that... I have the emotional scars to prove it. Brad has every other woman

here charmed, but Margot says she sees through his bullshit and she refuses to transfer to the

blackjack room. She says it has nothing to do with our friendship either. That she's just been here

long enough to know that Brad is full of it.

She waggles her eyebrows at me suggestively and I can't help but laugh nervously. "Margot!

Storm wasn't flirting with me! Sheesh! He's just being a gentleman. I'm a married woman, remember?" I hold up the envelope and wave it around before pushing it between the slats of Brad's locker. "For now, anyway."

Margot shrugs her shoulders and looks at me seriously, her blue eyes piercing. "That's not going to stop Brad. You're just giving him permission now. The whole time you were gone to New York and then laid up in bed with broken bones, he was fucking his way through the new girls who had no idea about you... or just didn't care."

I shudder at the thought of Brad getting between every pair of legs he can spread. Just thinking about the number of STDs that man could have exposed me to reminds me that I need to bump up my appointment with my gyno. I laugh and slap Margot's arm playfully, "Honestly, I don't care what he does with his dick anymore. But I'd better call the girly doc. There's no time like the present to make sure that bastard didn't share anything icky with me. Nobody wants a side of chlamydia with their dinner... or his DNA...the last thing this world needs is a miniature version of Brad."

Margot winces at my joke. She turns away from me to pick at her nails, a habit she's always had when she's got something on her mind that she knows she should say, but doesn't want to bring up.

Shit, she's hiding something. I sigh, "Out with it Margot... I know you're withholding information, so just tell me. Let me guess... Brad knocked one of his bimbos up, huh? Figures since that was always

his number one goal.”

She blanches as her gaze pops up to mine. She stares at me incredulously. “How... how the fuck did you know? It’s not confirmed yet, but everyone thinks it’s his.”

I feel my stomach turn as my gaze snaps up to hers, “Wait...what? Seriously? He knocked one of the waitresses up? And he’s only a *contender* for the father? Shit, he must be pissed about that.”

Margot’s pale face goes pink as she nods quickly, casting her eyes at the floor. “I think so. Like I said, it isn’t confirmed, so don’t go getting upset.”

I stop my silent revelry for a moment and look at Margot like she’s got an extra head. “Are you kidding? Why would I be upset?”

Margot plops both of her hands on her tiny waist and narrows her eyes at me like I’m dense.

“Your husband got another woman pregnant. Aren’t you the least bit angry? Betrayed? Upset?”

I shrug my shoulders and level my gaze at Margot. “Why should I be? He’s been trying to plant

his demon seed in me for years. I haven’t spent all this time and money thwarting him just to get angry

when he manages to sow his oats into some other poor clod. Thank God, he won’t be my problem

much longer. I filed for divorce from the idiot. I do feel sorry for whatever sleazy ho was dumb

enough to let him fuck them bareback, though.”

Margot’s mouth falls open about the time I wish I’d kept mine shut. Shit. I narrow my eyes at her

and blink in surprise. “You fucked Brad?!? Have you lost your goddamned mind or just your dignity?!?”

She moves her mouth like she’s trying to explain herself, but I just shake my head at her sadly.

“Save it. You two deserve each other. Give me a few weeks to let the ink dry on the divorce papers and you can have him and all his sleaze, all to yourself.”

I turn to walk away from her, but she grabs me by the arm and whirls me around to face her,

“Well, if you’d been doing it, he wouldn’t have had to find it elsewhere! You’re supposed to keep your husband happy!”

I blink at her in surprise. “Is that what he told you? Because I had more sex with that man that a porn star has in the average work month... and that’s even when you consider the replays the porn gets.”

Margot frowns. “It was only one time!”

I shrug my arm away from her and shake my head at her sadly. “That’s all it takes, Margot. I

thought you had more sense than that. But congratulations. You let him sink his claws into you and now you will *never* escape his clutches.”

She points her finger at me with a startled gasp. Her voice is borderline hysteric as she wags her

finger around in the air, “Who are you to talk? You’re his *wife*! How can you stand there and act high and mighty when you encourage his behavior! You know, it’s because you won’t fuck him that he has to go out and get it elsewhere! This is all *your* fault!”

I hold one hand up at her, nervous laughter bubbling out of my mouth.
I nod solemnly, then giggle
again. My emotional regulation meter is obviously broken as tears of
frustration slide down my
cheeks while I double over in laughter. The sour taste in my mouth
intensifies as I wrap my arms
across my belly to try to stop the uncomfortable pinch that's gripping
my gut from laughing too hard.

I gasp as I try desperately to swallow air to fill my lungs, but despite
myself, I can't seem to
catch my breath. I continue to gulp at the air like a fish out of water
until a cold voice startles me into inhaling sharply, "What's so funny here?"

Whipping around, I find myself face to face with the devil. Instantly
the humor in the poetic irony
evaporates and I find myself through him as he stands before me
looking perturbed. Don't believe
what people say about the devil having red, glowing eyes. I can assure
you that the devil's stare is ice
cold blue, just like his heart. My voice is flat as I address him, "Brad."

He narrows his eyes at my lack of even attempting to be friendly. He
glances over at Margot,
then at me and puts on a suave smile like he *hasn't* been getting
horizontal with who I *thought* was a friend I could count on. His voice is
smooth, all hints of disdain gone as he addresses her, "Margot.
It's lovely to see you again..." He lowers his voice to try to hide his
next words, but I hear him
anyway, "...with clothes on."

I take a deep breath and count slowly in my head. I'm trying my
damndest not to say something
that I know will provoke him, but he's not the only one with a temper
here. He smirks at me and
spouts off, "It's nice to see that some of the waitresses here care about
their appearance. Your hair is

looking lovely with the subtle highlights of blue you've got going on.
They really bring out your eyes
and make them pop."

Margot giggles, despite the look of fury I lob in her direction. It's the
proverbial straw that
breaks the camel's back and I can't keep my snide remarks to myself
any longer. "Yeah, kinda like
she's going to in a few months." I make a crude gesture in front of
myself as I mimic having a pregnant
belly. "Looks like you finally succeeded in knocking up someone with
that tiny prick of yours."

I hear the smack before I feel the searing pain on the right side of my
face, followed by a sharp
gasp that sounds like Margot. I lick my bottom lip and groan when I
taste blood. So the bastard
finally hit me. I stumble backwards slightly, but regain my balance
fairly quickly and shake my head
to try to dampen the ache that's radiating through my jaw. I twist it
side to side and gain confidence
knowing it isn't broken.

I should shut up right about now and not provoke the bear. I delivered
the divorce papers
already, but it's just not in me to back down from a fight. I may have
spent years letting Brad have his way with me sexually, but I will be
damned if I stand here and let him hit me. I may not be able to
stop him, but I'm not going down without a fight. I muster what's left
of my pride from somewhere
deep inside of me and let it all out in a scream that rivals a banshee.

Despite the upbeat music and the clicks, beeps, and dings of the
hundreds of gaming machines
just outside the swinging door that leads to the employee break room,
there's no way that my scream

goes unheard. Brad leaps across the floor and presses me up against the wall with his body. He
shoves his hand against my mouth hard enough that he forces my head back against the wall. I see
stars as the back of my head cracks against the plaster surface and I know now that this isn't going to
be one of our typical fights. This is going to be the fight to end all fights.

I open my mouth and bite down as hard as I can into the fleshy part of his hand. He howls like a
rabid dog and I close my eyes in anticipation of whatever is about to happen next. I brace myself, but
nothing can prepare me for the one-two-three set of sucker punches that Brad lands on my face. This
is about the time that Margot decides it's appropriate to scream at the top of her lungs.

I groan in pain as I feel my head growing heavy. I open my eyes and see Margot staring in
complete shock at the scene in front of her, backing out of harm's way as quickly as she can as she
stares on in horror. Brad has stepped away from me and is wiping his hand on his pants, pacing back
and forth and he growls, "Look what you made me do, Poppy!" He turns back to me as my eyelids
struggle to stay open. I'm not sure if I'm losing consciousness or if my eyes are swelling, but either
way, my vision is getting fuzzy as I struggle to stay standing.

I spit at his feet, narrowly missing his designer leather shoes. "Fuck you, Brad. I didn't turn you
into the devil... you took the highway to hell all by yourself!" I focus all of my energy into lifting my
left leg up and flinging it in his direction. I don't hit my intended target of his family jewels, but I do make contact with his shin.

His hand is wrapped around my neck faster than I can blink as his hot breath blows across my face, “You little bitch! You’re going to pay for that!”

He pushes me up the wall until my feet are dangling helplessly under me. I struggle against him

with my hands, but the effort is fruitless. His hand is tightening more and more against my throat and

I’m finding that I can’t get a breath into my lungs. I *can* hear a ruckus going on behind me and raised voices, but I’m too woozy to discern who any of them might belong to. I wobble slightly and gasp for

air as Brad’s grip on my throat lessens and my feet hit the floor. Instead of holding up my weight, they

buckle underneath me and the last thing I remember before everything fades to black is the faint scent

of vanilla and being lifted off the floor in a crumpled heap of limbs.



TWENTY

Storm

Watching that asshole throw Poppy around like a rag doll set off an explosion inside of me that

turned me into a raging beast. I’m still not sure that I’m stable enough not to hulk out again the minute I’m provoked. I’m fairly sure that my fist

hitting the back of that jerk's head was the sound heard
 'round the world. It was certainly loud enough when he tumbled into
the wall, tripped over a bench,
 and knocked a set of freestanding lockers to the floor with his face.
Okay, so the rest of his body
 probably had something to do with the crashing too, but that's not the
point.

As soon as he let go of Poppy's throat, she collapsed to the floor and
my attention zeroed in on
 her. She looked so helpless crumpled on the floor like a discarded toy.
Whoever the girl was that
 was in the room with her, she wisely stayed back as I stormed over to
her and lifted her up off the
 floor, then ran out of the employee break room as fast as my legs could
carry me. I don't know how
 much time passed with her unconscious in my arms, but it felt like I'd
barely even gotten her out of the
 room when police officers and paramedics stormed in through the front
doors of the Wonderland
 casino.

The paramedics had taken her from me and I *may* have been a little bit
belligerent with them and
 growled at the first one to approach me. The threat of a taser pointed in
my face made it a smidge
 easier for me to allow them to take her from me. Once the paramedics
shouted that she was alive and
 breathing on her own, just knocked out and beaten up, I began to pull
myself out of beast mode.
 That's when I realized that the police officers were trying to talk to me.
The only part I heard of what
 they had to say was, "For your own safety," as I felt the bite of cold
metal against my wrists as they
 were yanked behind my back.

While sitting on the floor in the middle of the casino where I just fought to a sold out crowd a

week ago, I explained everything that happened. Apparently, the dark-haired girl that was still

cowering in the break room corroborated what I had to say, because they didn't arrest me on the spot.

They did, however, arrest Poppy's husband. He had a nice goose egg forming on the side of his head

as the officers led him out in cuffs and if the look he was giving me wasn't damning enough, the

words he spat at me solidified his intent, "I will sue you so far up Shit Creek, Braxton Storm, that

you'll never be able to get near my wife ever again."

I should have kept my mouth shut, but once a street fighter, always a street fighter and I've been

very good at holding my tongue. "Ex-wife," I mused at him as the officers dragged him along while

dozens of people gawked at the casino's top blackjack dealer being led out in cuffs. Especially since

he looked like he got into a fight with a dog and lost. Which, he kinda did, I guess. When Brad heard

what I had to say, he'd stopped dead in his tracks, glaring at me with a murderous expression as he

strained against the police officers trying to get him outside.

I know, you shouldn't poke a bear, especially one that's caught in a trap, but I couldn't help

myself. Just before the officer that's bigger than me shoved Brad outside through the revolving door,

I'd informed him, "If you hadn't been so busy trying to beat the shit out of Poppy, you'd have noticed

she served you with divorce papers. She's done with your bullshit, Brad. And she's done with you."

Once the officers had determined that I was no longer a threat to anyone, they let me go with a

stern warning against slamming any other douchebags into walls. It was a relief to hear the officers

essentially agree with what I'd done, but as soon as the cuffs were off me, my concern turned to

Poppy. One of the officers gave me a lift to the hospital where they took her while I dug through her

phone they'd recovered to try to find Hunter's number. Hunter hadn't answered, but I did manage to

get a hold of her other brother, Jasper. Thankfully, Poppy's pretty transparent with labeling her

contacts. Jasper said he'd be on the first flight out of Malibu and asked me to stay with her.

So that's where I am now. Sitting in the waiting room at AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center,

pacing the floor so much they're probably going to have to replace the hypoallergenic carpet. Jasper

got here an hour ago and he's been holed up in her room, where Poppy hasn't made much progress

since being brought in last night. They won't discuss her medical care with me, but Jasper's her

brother, so they've been giving him details and he's filled me in on the most important stuff.

Brad essentially choked her out, but they're saying she's going to be okay. Which is good,

because if I didn't already want to kill Brad, him hurting Poppy beyond repair would set me into a

rage where I would, without a doubt, murder him. No ifs, ands, or buts about it - I would literally

murder the asshole. Right now, Jasper says it's just a waiting game until she comes around, but he's

warned me that there could be some memory loss and they don't know how much yet, especially if

there's anything more than superficial damage.

Jasper says there's a girl back in Malibu who's going through something similar, except instead of a man beating the shit out of her, it was a rogue wave that she tried to surf. Instead of stunning everyone on the beach, where Jasper was luckily on duty as the lifeguard. She was slammed to the ocean floor, but he was able to pull her out before she drowned, though she still suffered some damage from the accident. He says that girl woke up, but that she's got a severe case of amnesia and is missing weeks of time from before the accident.

He says he's working with her to remember who she is, but since she didn't have any ID on her, and there's no missing persons reported in the area matching her description, they've hit a dead end. I can't even imagine having to help someone remember who they are, but then again, I guess, in a way, I've done that for Poppy too. Less reminded her who she used to be and more reminded her what she isn't. And she isn't anyone's property.

I hear a flurry of activity coming from down the hall and my heart lurches into my chest at the possibility that something has gone wrong with Poppy. Damn why do I care so much? She's not even my girlfriend, just a friend that's a girl. Oh, who am I kidding... if she'd have me, I'd be a hell of a lot more than a friend. I already know that we're physically compatible and the conversations between us have been easy. There's never any uncomfortable silence and she even used my toothbrush for the week she crashed with me at the hotel in Egg Harbor. If that kind of blind trust isn't friendship, I don't know what is.

And my heart aches to think that right now, something drastic may be altering both of our futures

forever. I can't take the suspense any longer and storm out of the waiting room, clomping my enormous feet down the stark white linoleum floors, surrounded by stark white walls with stark white lighting. I swear, when I do settle down and buy a house, I am not putting white anywhere in it. It's so stale and medicinal that I'd lose my mind in a place like that. A home should be bright and colorful and reflect the personalities of the people living there, not look like it belongs in a magazine of unachievable dreams.

I stop at the doorway as I hear voices inside. To my delight, I can hear Poppy's voice... she's awake! My heart soars at the thought, but then dives back down to Earth as I hear the panic in her voice.

"No, no, no... don't tell me that. You must have the wrong chart. There is no way I'm pregnant. I sabotaged Brad's every effort. *Every* time. I made sure that he'd never spawn a demon inside of me. There was never a single time that I wasn't diligent to make sure it wouldn't happen."

A male voice, soft but stern replies to her, "Ma'am... the test results are conclusive. You are very much pregnant, by our guess, approximately seven weeks along, maybe eight. We confirmed the urinalysis with an ultrasound. There's a heartbeat, nice and strong, about 160 beats per minute. You're very much pregnant, and from what we can tell, it's a healthy pregnancy with a hearty fetus."

Poppy's voice is adamant as she declares, "No way in hell am I giving birth to anything with Brad's demon blood. I don't want it in me... there has to be something that can be done. Put it in

someone else. Someone that can't have kids, but *please* don't make me give birth to the spawn of Satan."

All is quiet for several moments until I hear Jasper's good-natured, surfer-boy voice break through the silence, "Could it be somebody's else's?"

Immediately, Poppy denies it. "I'm married. What do you think I am? A floozy? Just because my husband is an asshole, doesn't mean I'm the town slut. There's not anybody else that could be the father... except..."

"Me," I breathe as I step into the edge of her room, my heart thundering in my chest wildly as the realization slaps me in the face.

With a gasp, Poppy looks up to where I'm filling the doorway to her hospital room. My hair is loose and wild around my face. I haven't slept since I brought her in and I'm sure I have dark circles under my eyes. My clothes could probably walk on their own right about now, and I likely smell as awful as I look. I probably look homeless, to be honest, but right now, I honestly don't care.

The doctor turns to look at me in surprise, shaking his head. "Who let him in here?" Two nurses move toward the door, obviously to shut me out of the room, but the doctor holds his hand up, "Wait. What did you say?"

I swallow the lump in my throat and count backwards on my hand, "You said seven weeks?"

The doctor nods, shaking his hand in the air, “Somewhere around there. There’s no way to be one-hundred percent sure of a date of conception.”

I release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding and step into the room. I look at Poppy and see that she looks absolutely terrified right now. I nod slowly, then repeat myself, “Me. It’s mine... the baby’s mine...”



EPILOGUE

Poppy

“By the power vested in me, by the state of New York and as witnesses by friends and family, I now pronounce you husband and wife...”

My knees buckle slightly as a wave of nausea crashes into me. I sway slightly as the world tilts on its axis momentarily. Bringing my hand to my mouth, I silently will the bubbling sensation in my gut to subside. ‘Five more minutes,’ I mutter to myself quietly, “...five more minutes...”

I can assume my face must be some shade of baby shit green right about now, because half a

dozen people are looking at me worriedly. One of them is Storm. He looks like he's about ready to

bolt across the aisle at any given moment to catch me if I fall. I hold one hand up and motion for the

officiant to keep going. Then I glance at Storm and make a motion to him to stay put. There's no sense

in making a big deal out of small potatoes. The officiant looks at me one last time and nods.

"You may kiss your bride..."

The crowd around me cheers and I feel an overwhelming sense of relief flood through me. I

survived the wedding ceremony, which is more than I thought I'd be able to do, if I'm being honest. It

took nearly every ounce of willpower I could dredge up just to make it through this, though... and

there's still a whole reception to follow.

"I now present to you, for the first time unified in marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Eli DuBois."

I give Ashley a sheepish smile as she and Eli turn around, hand in hand, at the altar and begin to

walk back down the aisle to the thumping beat of Guns 'n Roses. She smirks as she glances at the no-

longer-able-to-be-hidden-roundness of my stomach and practically shoves her bouquet into my hands.

She's several weeks ahead of me in her pregnancy and she is absolutely *glowing*. God, I hope I reach that milestone soon, because right now I feel like poop on a stick and I am insanely envious of her.

She and Eli waltz through the gathered crowd of well-wishers, including half a dozen men at the

perimeter of the ceremony location that I *know* her uncle sent here. I know that the guards are here to protect Eli and Ashley and the other Rogers' siblings, but it's nice to know there's no way Brad can get anywhere near me, either. If I thought he was crazy before, the divorce papers sent him into a whole new stratosphere of angry.

Initially, he was released on his own recognizance. When he tried to confront me in the hospital just hours after regaining consciousness from the assault, his bond was revoked and he was arrested again and thrown in jail without bond. He currently awaits trial on charges of domestic assault and attempted murder (two counts since I was pregnant at the time.) The fact that he made terroristic threats against both the hospital and me when he found out that I'm pregnant, helped speed that decision along.

Despite having Brad out of my life, at least temporarily, there was a heavy cloud looming over me for much of my recovery from Brad's assault. Storm was amazing. He rented us a small apartment in Atlantic City, despite his distaste of living in the city. He said he got a good deal and that the added security features of the building made it worth giving up his nomadic lifestyle. But it wasn't the where or the what that had me bothered and Storm knew it. He knew that my concerns were all focused on the baby growing inside of me and determining which one of them is the father.

Thankfully, because of Storm's wise investment of the money he's made over the years fighting, he has a healthy nest egg saved up and was able to pay for an elective blood test that could determine paternity as early as twelve weeks. So on the date I hit twelve weeks, according to our assumption

that he's the father anyway, both of us submitted several vials of blood to determine our future. Storm

told me he'd stay by my side regardless of the paternity of the little one, because both of us need a positive male influence in our lives.

His promise to stick by me regardless ending up being unnecessary because the paternity test

concluded, without a doubt, that Storm is the father of my unborn daughter. Yeah, you read that right.

It's a girl. One of the side effects of the paternity test was being able to find out the gender from the baby's DNA present in my own blood. Since I've never been pregnant and there was no hint of a Y

chromosome anywhere, the test showed that baby is a girl, which explains the horrific, lingering

morning sickness. Although it should really be called all day sickness because it happens morning,

noon, and night. I'm just under fourteen weeks pregnant now and I've actually *lost* weight from all the puking.

Ashley is quite jealous that I know the baby's gender already since she can't find out for another

week or two, although I suspect her baby is a boy like Aspen's. Aspen is about ready to pop. She's

due in three weeks and is completely miserable, but she's carrying that baby high and right under her

ribs, so there's no way Gwen will get a little brother yet. Her husband, Blake, looks like he's as

ready as she is for that baby to get here, though.

Ashley likes to tease her brother that he and Aspen are about to have *zero* time for sex now, since they'll have two kids under two. I laugh as Blake offers his arm to Aspen, Ashley's matron of honor,

and they start back down the aisle behind the bride and groom. He slides his free hand lovingly over

her protruding belly and smiles. He's a good guy. Aside from his eyes bugging out at the prospect of

not having sex for a while, Blake agreed that it was probably a good thing since the pregnancy thing seems to be contagious.

Raven is refusing to drink after any of us, claiming that she doesn't want to catch it, which is a

good thing since she'd have to leave the headache trial if she got pregnant. I keep joking with Hunter

that he better wrap that thing well since they can't seem to keep their hands off each other. Sometimes

I wonder if they're making the candies that made Raven lose the ability to control herself, just for

kicks. Whatever is up with those two, they can barely keep their hands off each other, even now as

Hunter steps across the aisle and offers his arm to Raven. She giggles and locks her arm with his and

they practically skip back down the aisle like two lovesick puppies.

It's late August now and I had no idea why *anyone* would want to get married during the high

summer heat, but as I turn to take Storm's arm to follow the rest of the bridesmaids back down the

aisle, I realize exactly why Ashley chose this time of year. It may be hot, and the baby blue gown

Ashley chose for us to wear may be clinging to things it shouldn't be clinging to, but the scenery is

gorgeous. It helps that Ashley's new husband is an extraordinary gardener, but they obviously chose

August because the roses are in full bloom in a rainbow of colors. As we walk down along the rose-

lined aisle, I smile as I come across a grouping of stark white ones. I nudge Storm gently, "Hey, I

know you hate things that are white. Wanna paint these red?"

Storm's mouth twitches as he tries not to laugh, shaking his head at me. "You're bad, Poppy." I

just shrug my shoulders and smirk. “You know you like it and you’re not complaining.” Storm shrugs

his shoulder innocently. He’s not about to stick his foot in his mouth and I know exactly why. Being

pregnant has made me extremely horny and I’m practically mauling him twice a day. He makes a

motion like he’s locking his mouth and throwing away the key and I just roll my eyes at him.

“Hey Pop, you’re looking mighty pretty today. Better be careful before you upstage the bride.

Pregnancy looks good on you.”

I turn around quickly to find my baby brother, Jasper, standing behind us. I hadn’t even realized

he was in the crowd! It makes me wonder if my other siblings have come, but a quick survey of the

crowd tells me they’re nowhere to be found. That’s a shame. I haven’t seen Easton in over a year and

it’s been months since I’ve seen Maisy, since before my accident when she dropped by for a weekend

to visit at the ranch before she took off to California with Jasper. I smile and throw my arms around

him, hugging him tightly. “Cali’s been good to you. You look fantastic!”

Jasper nods, chuckling as he steps away, his blonde hair waving in the wind. I reach up and tug

on his unruly locks and rib him, “You’re turning into a surfer boy!

He nods, blushing slightly. “Yeah, Cali’s been good. For both of us, though Maisy is still

immersed in her drifter lifestyle. She never stays in one place long. Last I heard, she’s applied to a

temp agency and was working in various white collar offices in Beverly Hills. Can’t say I ever

expected *that*, but we all gotta do whatever surfs our wave.”

He winks at me, then turns to Storm, “Which reminds me. Storm, can I talk to you for a minute?”

Storm shrugs, then hold his arms open wide, “I can talk to you man, but your sister has my balls in her purse. Anything you gotta say to me, you gotta say in front of her.”

Jasper snorts. “Fair enough, bro. You know what side your bread’s buttered on. But this kinda has to do with a girl. You remember that surfer I pulled out of the water? Well, her memory still hasn’t returned. I know you’d said your trainer, Joe, is a doctor and all and he’s worked with some head trauma patients before. I was just wondering if you could maybe get her a consult with him? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I kinda like her as she is...”

I interrupt Jasper and elbow him in the ribs, “You’re banging her, aren’t you?”

Jasper’s cheeks go bright red. He points at me. “Precisely the reason I didn’t want to discuss this in front of you, Pop. But yes, we’re... involved. She moved in with me and she says she’s thrilled to be part of my world, but I know that she has to wonder where she came from. I was hoping maybe Joe could get some insight into her past. Find out who she really is... I mean, she couldn’t even tell me her name. I kissed the girl before I figured out what to call her! It’s almost like she didn’t speak English. And she’s a bit quirky. Not that I’m complaining... I kinda dig a girl who isn’t afraid to put her hair up with a fork. It gives her a laissez-faire vibe that I totally dig.”

Storm nods and slaps a hand on Jasper's shoulder. "Yeah, I'll get you in touch with Joe. Sounds

like you're pretty smitten with the girl. What if she realizes who she is, and she doesn't think you're such a charming prince?"

Jasper shrugs. "That's a risk I'm willing to take. Sometimes you just know when something is

right, and I want to make sure that she remembers everything about her life, not just since the day we met under the sea..."

A note from the author: The first chapter in this book is a scene that happens all too often and

can be a touchy subject for many, myself included. But it *happens*. It happens every day to women, men, and children from all walks of life and it is *never* okay. Domestic violence and sexual assault are a real problem and so many times, survivors don't know where to turn or who to tell. "No"

means "no," and it isn't always verbal. Just because someone remains silent, doesn't mean they

consent. Know the difference between consent and assault. And if you've been the victim of a sexual

assault or domestic violence, tell someone. Let somebody help you put the pieces of the puzzle back

together because nobody deserves to suffer in silence. It doesn't define you as a person, so don't let

it define the rest of your life. If you or someone you know is a survivor of domestic violence and/or

sexual assault, please visit <https://www.rainn.org/resources> and contact somebody who can help.

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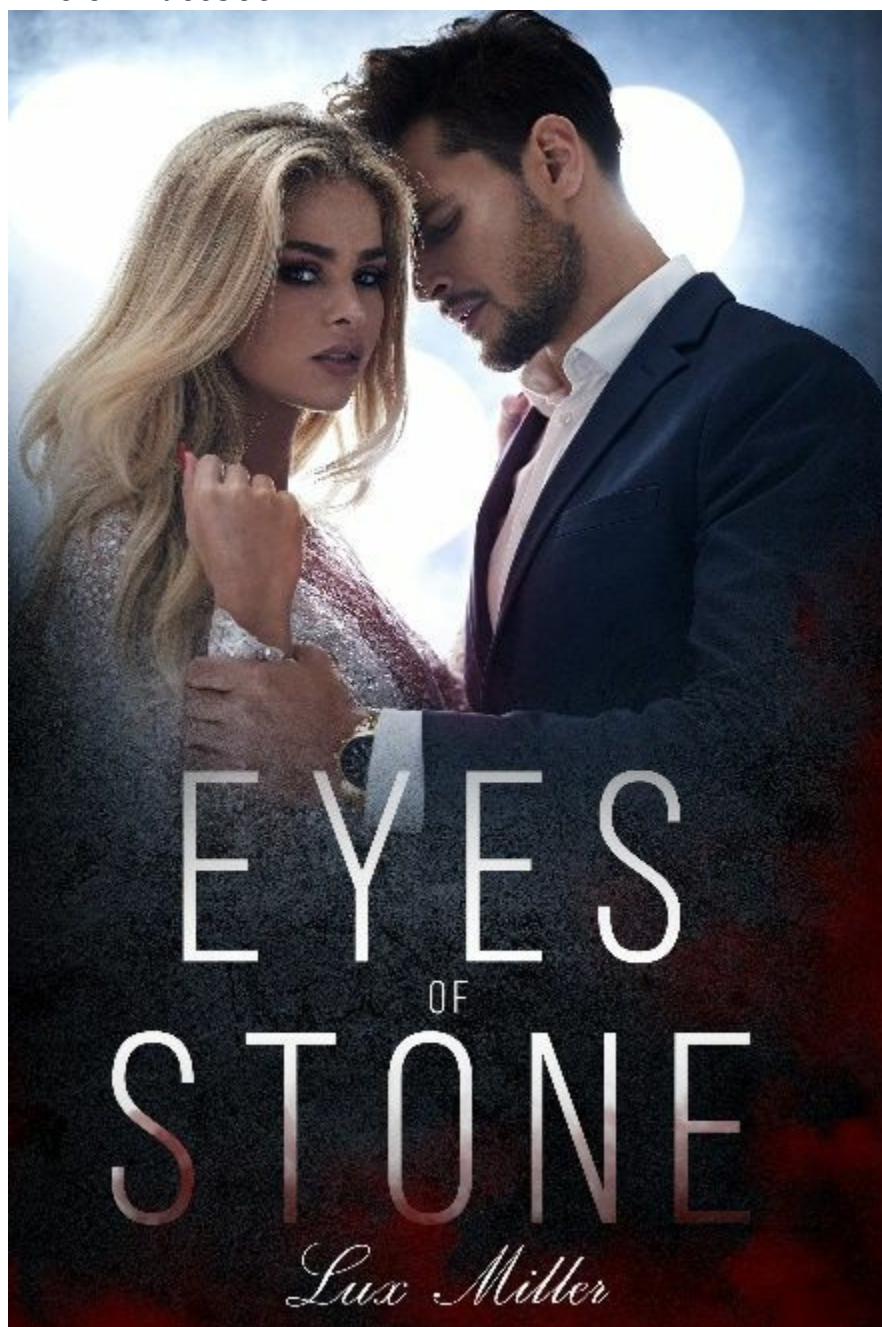
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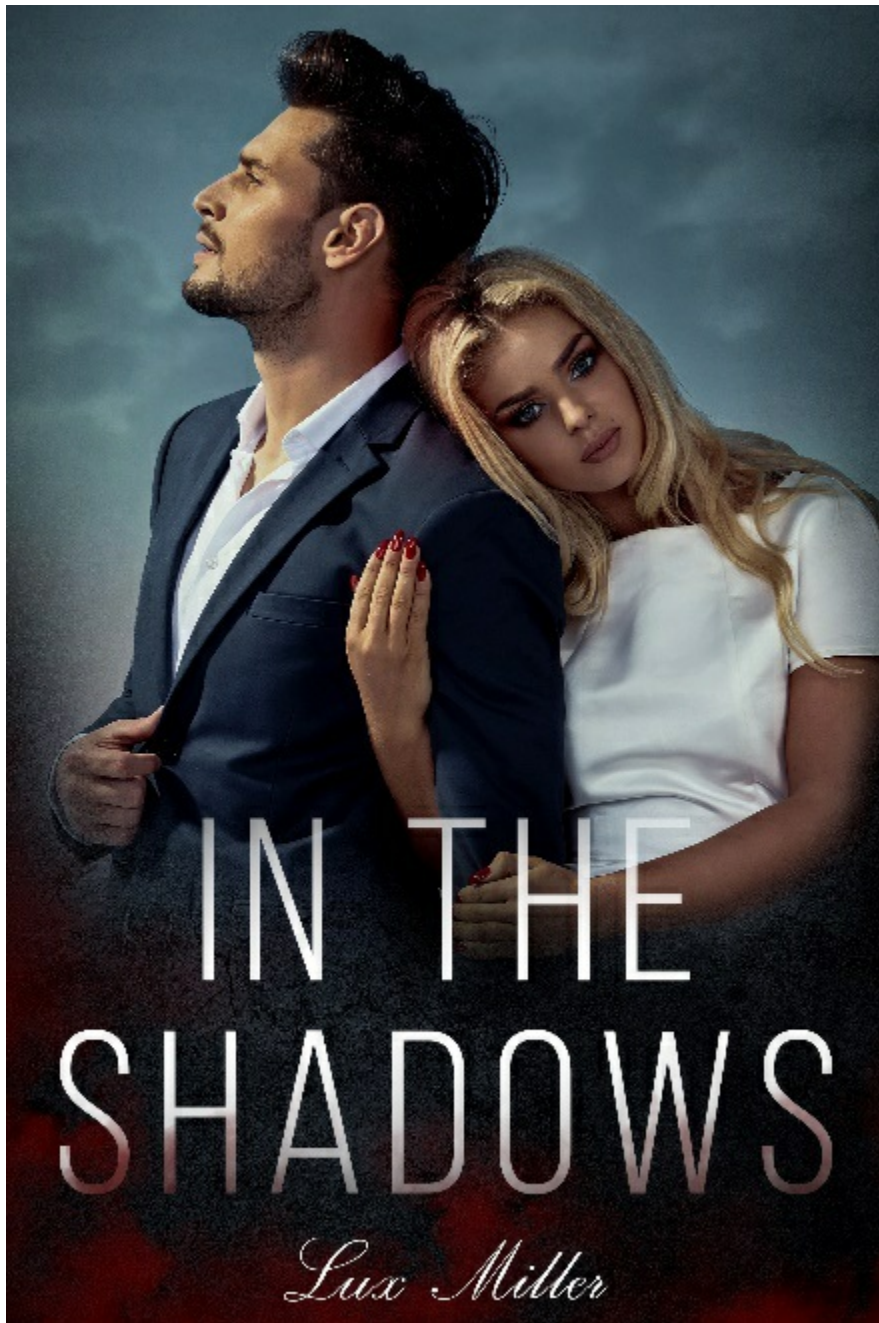
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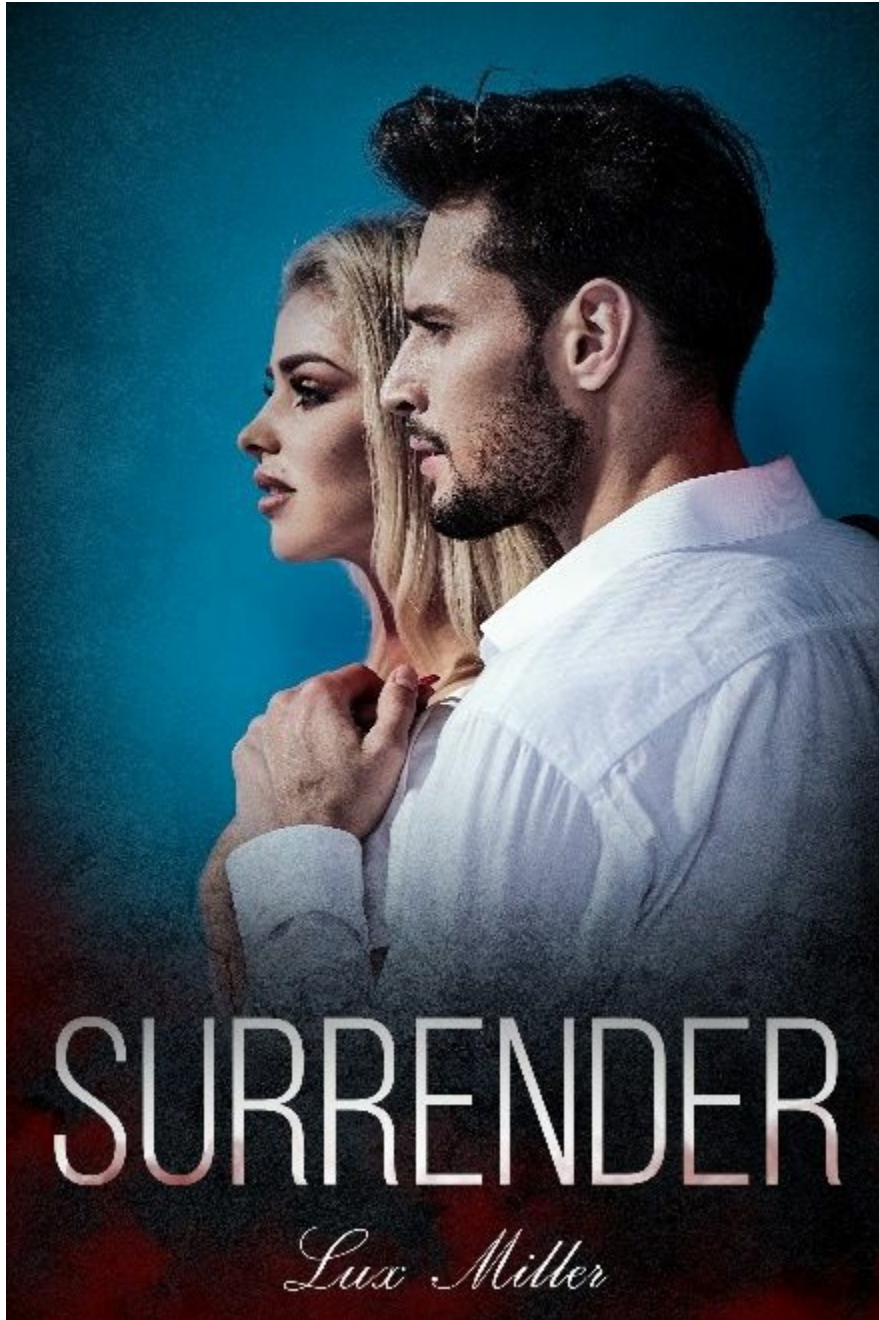
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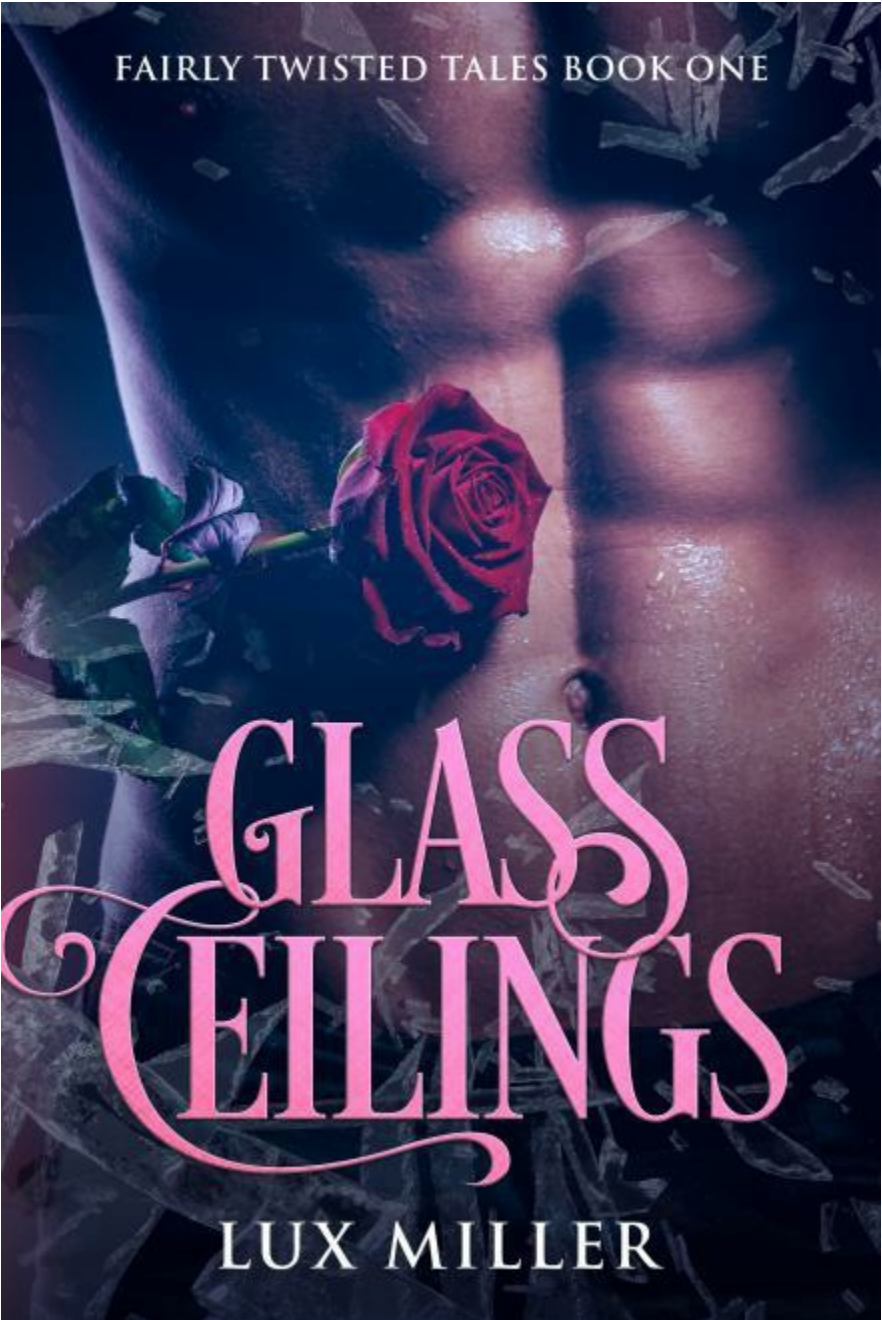




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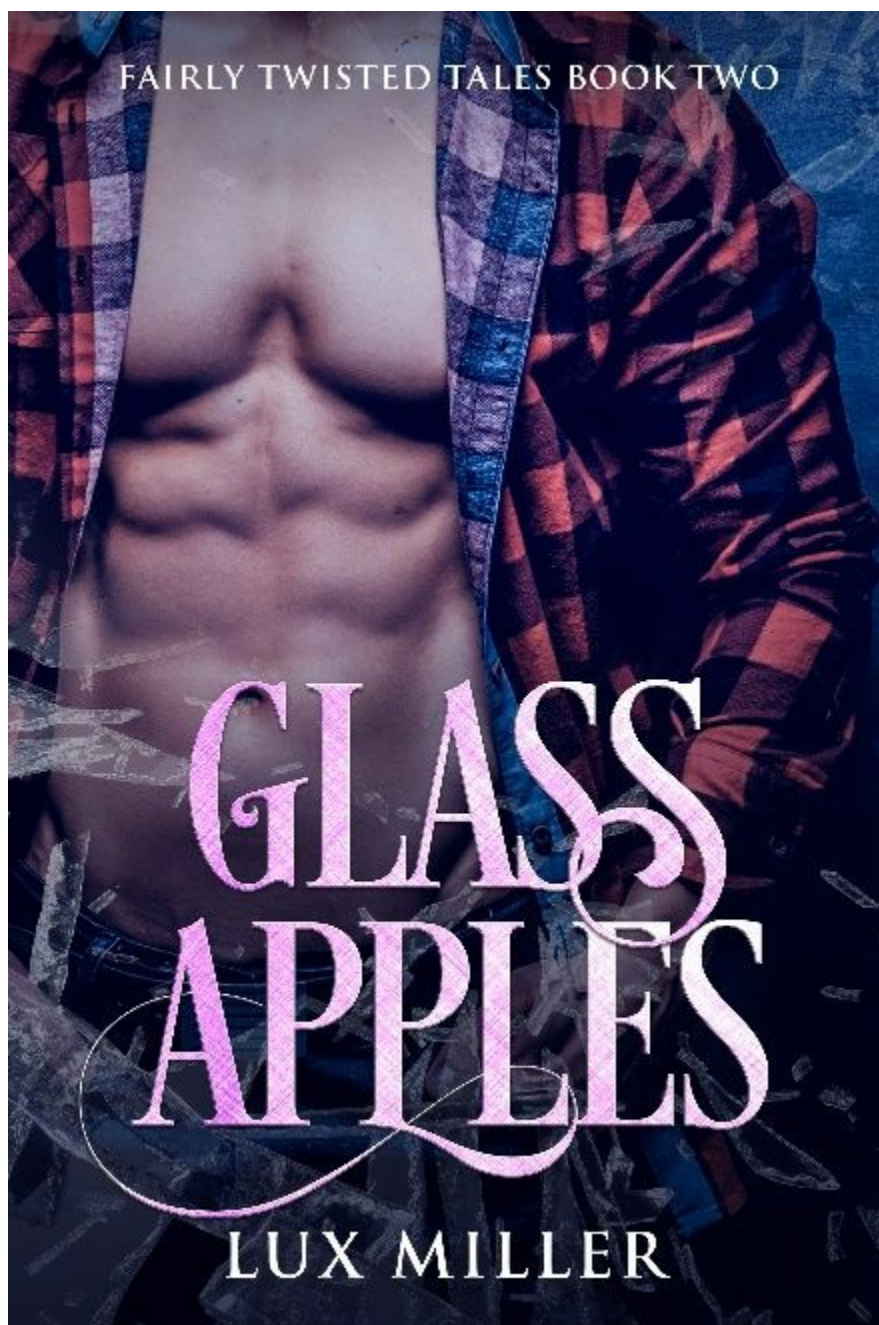


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